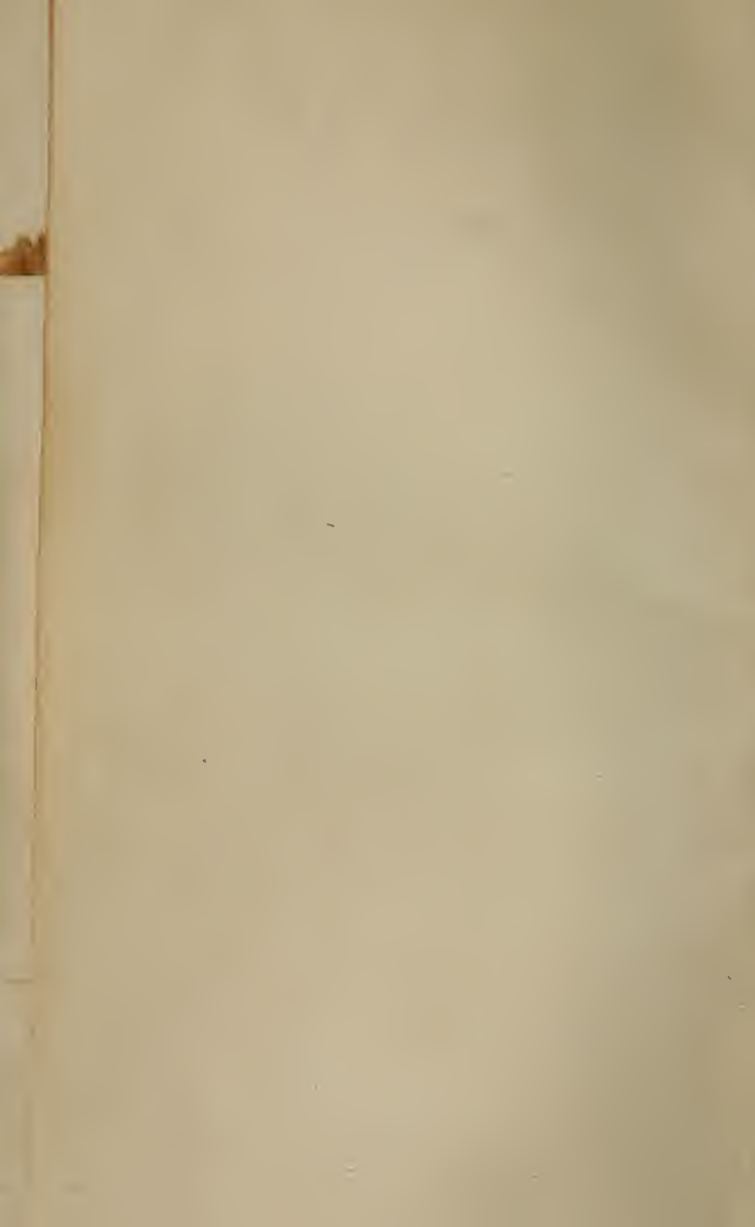






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JANET'S CHOICE.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

“MAGGIE'S SECRET.”

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

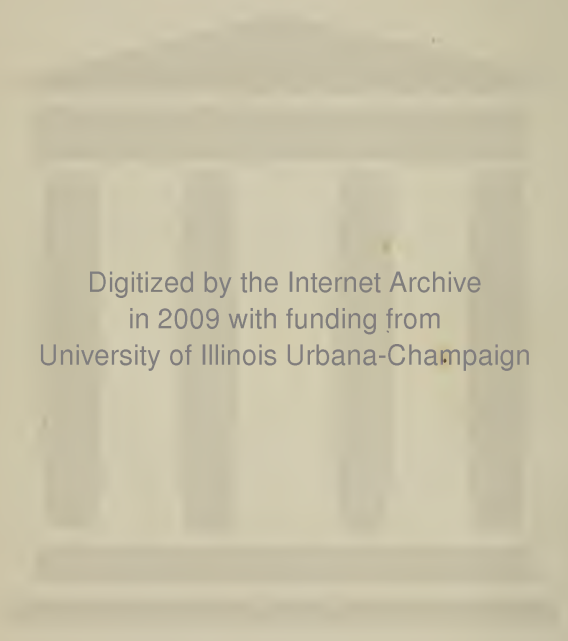
LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1872.

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JANET'S CHOICE.

CHAPTER I.

“Can I say how bright a future
Rose before my soul that day,
Oh, so strange, so sweet, so tender—
And I had to turn away.”

A. PROCTOR.

WE must now return to Janet,
having let her remain too long
unnoticed in her sad, forlorn condition.

Certainly, work is a very good thing,
but so is play in its proper place. Em-
ployment is necessary for the mind, but
so is castle-building sometimes by way
of a change.

Janet had found out for herself a store of happiness in her own imagination, and it was in that particular that she differed so very much from the other members of the family.

It was not that her own thoughts made her work the less, they rather supplied her with new fire and energy for her tasks.

Sometimes when her dairy-work was done, Janet would creep into a quiet corner, and with her knitting in her hands indulge in a long and fanciful dream, while, all the time, her needles were moving with the mechanical click, click of a practised knitter, and the stocking would grow beneath her fingers, with no dropped stitches, being narrowed at regular intervals, as homely and well knitted a garment as if no airy fancies, or impossible future, had been woven

into its threads. So far in her life, her imagination had been spent chiefly on Donald and his adventures; now a new train was given to her thoughts. She was very sorry for the laird, and for the disappointment she had caused him.

She pitied him sincerely, but I think she would have been more than woman if a slight tinge of self-complacency had not been mingled with her feelings. She had had the chance of marrying the laird and she had put it from her. She did not regret what she had done in the very least, it had only been right, and with the best of her heart's love given to Donald, how could she marry anyone else?

Still there was a little flutter of gratified vanity in the knowledge that she of all the world (in his case a

more extensive noun than in hers) had been considered worthy to fill that important post.

Probably if she had been a lady born this thought would not so often have come into her head, but humble in birth and station as she was, it is not to be wondered at that the step on the social ladder to which she had been invited to rise should have seemed to her of a giddy height. But that was the weak side of her nature, and Janet was saved from being much injured by its petty influences, by her own sacred power of faithful devotion.

Should she have allowed a mean and earthly spirit to take up its place in her heart, she would have driven out a blessing and harboured instead a bitter and life-tormenting curse. Donald Inverarity did not want much persuasion

to make him obey his master's order and go to the farm.

He was longing to see Janet, and directly he had heard of Andrew Macpherson's illness the thought had crossed his mind that, now that he was ill, there would be no one to prevent an interview.

Andrew's interdiction on his visits had only had the effect of fanning into a flame the glowing embers of his love for Janet. So now, armed with the laird's message, he felt there could be no possible harm in his paying a visit once more to the farm at Lashiels.

Accordingly as soon as the break was off, (it was not in Donald's nature to resist seeing the start of the handsome team) he went down the rocky steps and along the river's brink to the farm.

Every step of the way reminded him of Janet, and of their rambles together as children, when she, with her bright eyes clear with perfect, trusting faith had looked so innocently in his face, and begged him to go on with the tales of stirring adventure with which he delighted to astonish her.

Janet was walking along a covered way leading from the dairy to the store-room when Donald saw her. He caught a glimpse of her dress as she passed an open window, and knowing the ins and outs of the house perfectly, he soon made his way to her territory.

“Oh, Donald!” she exclaimed in surprise and fear. “How did you venture here !”

“I have come on a message from the laird,” said he, then as Janet blushed painfully and looked vexed, added hur-

riedly, "I have come at his bidding, but I believe I should have come anyhow; for ever since I first heard of your father's illness, I have been meaning to make some excuse and to come and look after you. How is he to-day?"

"Very bad, Donald" said Janet mournfully.

"I am glad I caught you here," he continued, "I was afraid you might be upstairs in his room and that I might not see you. You *are* glad to see me, Janet?"

"Donald, of course I am," she said very simply, putting both her hands into his. "Why do you doubt it?"

"Because I thought you looked a little vexed when I told you that the laird had sent me here; perhaps you thought I ought not to have needed telling, but that I should have come of my own self?"

“No, Donald, you know I never thought anything of the kind; my only fear was whether it is right for me to see you, now that he who parted us lies so ill up yonder.”

“Janet, they tell me the laird is a deal too fond of coming this way,” said Donald suddenly. “When was he here last, lassie?”

“He was here yesterday,” said Janet, getting terribly nervous and confused, she knew not why.

“But it was yesterday that your father had his stroke; he was here before that, I suppose?” said Donald.

“Yes, he was here in the morning before dinner-time,” said she.

“Whom was he talking with when he came?” said Donald, looking very grim and stern.

“With father first, and then with me,

Donald," said Janet; and as she spoke, the remembrance of that scene came again freshly before her eyes, and she turned first red and then pale under Donald's gaze. Never had he seen her look so confused. Her clear, placid, trusting look had gone—was it ever to return?

Village gossip had, as it may easily be supposed, been very busy as to Janet's frequent visits from the laird, but whenever Donald had heard such rumours, he had checked them with such high-handed scorn that, being a big fellow, and the village hero to boot, scandal-mongers had slunk away abashed at his approach.

The mice did not dare to rouse the sleeping lion, so Donald had easily silenced evil tongues as far as the slanders reached his ears.

But the small end of the wedge had

been driven in, and the demon of jealousy was not very far off, and was only waiting till the opening should have been made large enough to admit him.

“What was there that Janet was ashamed of?” he asked himself, as he saw her changing colour and quivering lips.

“How often has the laird been here lately?” said Donald, asking the question in a voice which Janet well knew meant that he intended to be answered.

“He has been here several times,” faltered Janet.

“Several times, and for what purpose, I should like to know?” said Donald.

“He always says he comes to speak to father about the alteration in the road,” said Janet.

“But he does not talk to you about the road, Janet, and they tell me he talks

more to you than to your father. "Come, Janet, speak out!" he continued, after a moment of painful silence, during which time he was forcing himself to speak calmly.

Janet looked up slyly, and with a bright flush, and her old true smile, said modestly—

"He will not come here again, Donald, at least I asked him not to do so."

"Then he *did* come here to see you, Janet?" said Donald, most unreasonably angry, "and nice familiar terms you seem to be on with the laird, indeed, to be telling him when to come and when to go in that fashion!"

"Donald!" said Janet, reproachfully, but Donald was too angry to heed her.

"My master used sometimes to tell me to trust no woman—'they are all alike,' he used to say, 'all weak and vain, and

fickle, and ready to be bought by the highest bidder.' I used to be angry with him then for saying so, but now I shall tell him that he is right after all. Good-bye, Janet, now that you keep such grand company, you won't care to be seen talking with me."

So saying he turned to leave her, his indignation being so strong as almost to choke him.

"Don't go, Donald, like that!" said Janet, "you are judging me harshly and cruelly, and it is not like your own old self to be so unkind."

"No! I am not like my own old self, Janet, you are quite right there," said he, "for in days gone-by I believed in you, and could have knocked any fellow's teeth down his throat, who dared to say a word against you; but now I begin to see that they were right, and I was

wrong. However, I am not the first man that has been fooled by a woman. They are all alike, as the Major says."

"Oh, Donald, Donald! how can you talk like that," cried Janet, as covering her face with her apron, she burst into tears.

Her sobs might have moved Donald had he been there; but it was too late, he was gone; and as he strode down the rocky path in angry haste, Janet's wailing cry seemed to thrill and echo in his ears. "Oh, Donald, Donald! how can you talk like that?"

How could he indeed? But jealousy is a perverting medium through which to gaze, and the readers of the "Vicar of Wakefield" have not now to be told for the first time that green spectacles are to be had by the gross—ugly things with pinchbeck rims, which distort and dis-

colour objects instead of revealing them clearly to the gaze.

Donald was bewildered by their livid and disagreeable light, and so the beauty, the freshness of Janet's character was misunderstood by him.

Janet was miserable when she saw that he had really gone. In all her griefs and troubles, the knowledge that Donald loved her, had been the one bright particular star to lighten her through the gloom—and now that had failed her, the darkness into which she was so suddenly plunged was most profound. Even then, at that moment of keen and bitter anguish, blame never crossed her lips. The poignant, aching sense of her suffering grew less as she sat there, with her hands clasped over her face, and the salt tears trickling slowly down between the fingers.

She was stupefied, stunned by the

suddenness of the blow; she could not realise what it was that had happened, and as she sat there, you might have thought in that dim shadowy light that she was indeed turned to stone, that it was a statue of "Weariness" or "Dejection," if you had not seen those clear tear-drops falling slowly, one after another, like rain-drops at the end of a Summer shower.

Rousing herself at last, she crawled slowly upstairs, and as she shut herself into her little bed-room in the roof, her sense of loneliness and desolation knew no bounds.

She felt ill from the nervous shock she had received, and the excitement of the last few hours.

She crouched down on the little strip of carpet by the side of her bed, and gave way to a paroxysm of bitter tears. Her brain was almost overpowered by the rush of memories which kept flooding in upon

it. There were countless fragments of by-gone moments, words, and looks by which she had persuaded herself that Donald was true and faithful, and would never, never doubt her. Persuaded herself, did I say? She needed no persuasion, she would as soon have thought a few hours ago of doubting the difference between black and white as of fearing that Donald could change.

Truly care and sorrow now reigned triumphantly in that humble dwelling.

In the room below Janet's, Mrs. Macpherson watched anxiously by the side of her husband's bed, so much taken up by his illness that she had no thoughts for anything else.

Susan moved to and fro with a briskness and activity quite characteristic of her.

She was self-possessed, sharp, and

bright, and fond of displaying these qualities whenever a field was opened to her. She was the only member of the family who did not stand in awe of her father's temper. When Andrew railed and rated Susan would answer him again, pertly enough sometimes, while the other sisters stood by aghast at her boldness.

Had Susan been the chosen one of the laird instead of Janet, she would have acted very differently from her sister in the matter.

Her reason would soon have told her that to accept such a good offer was her duty to her family, as well as being advantageous to herself. She was too young yet to have love affairs of her own, but she often thought about such things, and determined that when her turn came, no sickly sentimentality should stand

between her and her worldly advancement.

She could hardly restrain her disdain when she looked at Janet, and saw how pale and drooping, how weary and languid she was.

Janet with her unbroken constancy, her unshaken trust, could not believe that the beautiful image she had so long treasured in her heart was now only worthy to be disfigured and dethroned.

No ! she loved Donald still. She should always love him, and it did not occur to her that she could by any possibility cease to do so.

The heart of youth is not easily cast down ; it triumphs over danger, hardships, difficulties, sufferings, and poverty. It can hope on, though older hearts may mock and wonder at its infatuation. And so it was with Janet.

Surely Donald would find out his mistake; it could only be to try her that he had spoken as he did.

He would come back again soon and tell her so, and as hour after hour went by Janet started at the sound of every foot-step on the gravel path, and advanced to the window, her soft brown hair drawn back from her classic brow, the colour mounting visibly to her cheek with each hope, and then rushing back again with each fresh disappointment, leaving her pale as marble.

The hours dragged slowly on, and the day wore away somehow. The shadows of the trees grew longer and longer, but still he came not.

He will come this evening, said Janet softly to herself; but evening came and went, and night folded the valley in her peaceful cloud-curtains, but still he came

not; and when at last Janet, with eyes aching from long straining them by looking out into the gathering darkness, was forced to see that he would not come that night, she went to bed, saying to herself, "He will surely come to-morrow. I will not doubt him."

CHAPTER II.

“Oh matrimony ! thou art like
To Jeremiah’s figs,
The good is very good indeed,
The bad too sour for pigs.”

PETER PINDAR.

PETRONEL was a little confused in her manner when the whole party assembled at the cottage for a cup of tea before starting homewards. She was a little confused, a trifle off the balance of her usual calm cheeriness ; but I doubt whether what had passed between her and her silent adorer, would have been so soon seen, had it

not been for the unmistakable signs of his inward delight to be read in Mr. Poyns countenance.

He was positively brimming over with happiness! His eyes sparkled, his whole face glowed, and when a crowd of dirty little urchins assembled round the door of the village inn to see the "swells" start, he distributed "largesse," with the munificence of an emperor. Indeed such was his exuberant bliss that, if he had been asked to erect a pyramid of gold in memory of the occasion, I believe he would have consented, provided it were placed on the very identical sacred spot of ground on which Petronel had stood when her exquisite lips had framed the one monosyllable he had so longed to hear her say.

He seemed to have been transformed by magic into a new man, and though

still painfully shy, he found no difficulty in managing a *tête-à-tête* with Lady Morton, from the falls to the carriage, and of formally asking her consent to his engagement to her daughter.

“I am the luckiest fellow in the world, Lady Morton, and I only hope I shall be able to show you how grateful I am to you, for accepting me as a son, by making your daughter’s life a happy one.”

“She is a dear girl, Mr. Poyns, and you are asking me a great deal when you ask me to give her up,” said Lady Morton, the tears starting to her eyes.

“I know it, I know it,” said the enamoured swain, “she is an angel, and I shall be taking away the light of your house! but you could not expect

to keep her always—could you now? So beautiful as she is, and so admired as she must be wherever she goes?”

In short Mr. Poyns was thoroughly in love, and having obtained the consent of the lady to his proposal, he was by no means anxious to conceal the fact of his victory.

Accordingly during the homeward drive, his manner to Petronel was so openly-adoring, his expression was so entirely blissful, that as Mrs. Becket remarked, “the outsiders must indeed be blind, if they had not seen which way the cats were jumping.”

Archie had been occupied with his team, and being seated beside Major Armstrong on the box (who, being naturally reticent, and on this subject not likely to interfere, had held his

peace) had heard and seen nothing of what had happened.

What was his amazement, therefore, when they reached home and the ladies had retired to their rooms, as he was pacing up and down the terrace, at being joined by Mr. Poyns beaming with happiness.

“Do you know what I have come to tell you, Morton?” said he.

“Not I, indeed!” said Sir Archibald, knocking the ashes off the end of his cigar as he spoke. “Not I, indeed, but I hope if it is news at all, that it is good news.”

“I am come to tell you a glorious piece of news,” said Mr. Poyns, “that is to say glorious for me, you know. Your sister has promised to marry me.”

Archie stared! He had been so

blinded by his feeling for Janet, that all that had been going on in his own immediate circle was a mist to him. He had noticed nothing, thought of nothing of the kind!

“Is it true?” he said, “are you really engaged to Petronel?” Then seeing the expression of Mr. Poyns’ face changing from delight to surprise at his tone, he came to himself more fully and added. “Excuse me, old fellow, for my question, but the fact is you took me by surprise, you know! I never expected or thought of this.”

“Did you not see how devoted I was to her, long before I could screw my courage up to speak?” said Mr. Poyns.

“I never noticed you at all,” it was on the tip of Archie’s tongue to say, but he fortunately checked himself in time, before the words found utterance,

and substituted, "You know fellows are so often spoony about Pet, that I have given up wondering whom she would take to, but I am afraid in my surprise and astonishment you must have thought me very cold. I must wish you joy, old fellow, and indeed I trust for darling Pet's sake as well as your own, that this may be a very happy marriage."

John Poyns wrung the hand of his future brother-in-law with effusion, his unusual efforts at eloquence in the course of that day had exhausted him, and he had no more words at command; but he paced up and down the yew-tree terrace, side by side with Archie, almost silently till the dressing-bell rang, and the fumes of their cigars mingled in the evening air most harmoniously.

"What a blessing it is that he is not

a beggar to talk, like some of the fellows now-a-days," mused Archie. "It would be an awful nuisance to have a brother-in-law with a long tongue; I believe he is a good fellow too; but how came Pet to fancy him I wonder!"

Such were Archie's meditations, interspersed with comparisons respecting the various degrees of smoothness with which true love runs in different instances. Poyns loved Petronel, and it was all right between them; while he adored Janet, and yet his affairs were all wrong.

Was it right and just that some people should be so much luckier than others in the world?

Poor Archie was still very sore on the subject of his rejection. He had built so much upon Janet's acceptance of him. He had planned so often how those who had been most set against the marriage

should be conquered in the end by Janet's own sweetness.

“When she is properly dressed, and has been about a bit, there is no lady, that I know that would stand a chance for a moment by her side,” had been his thought, and now all his plans and hopes and projects had been nipped in the bud by her decided refusal of his love.

It was very hard, he thought, and the grievance grew more intolerable to him that evening, as he marked how calmly and deliberately his beautiful sister, Petronel, accepted the position, now open and avowed, of the future Lady Delabole.

Was it significant that it was by her future title that everyone thought of her? and not as the wife of the honest, worthy, good-hearted fellow who was so

delighted at his position as her betrothed? Grace was very thoughtful that evening. Since their father's death, theirs had been such a happy, united family; there had been no break in it. The circle had been small, but the sections of it had fitted very comfortably. Now a great change was likely to take place. One amongst them, the youngest, the most beautiful, the much considered Petronel, was about to leave them.

She was about to start on a new life; to have a new home and a new hearth of her own. Would she find that home as happy a one as the one she would have left? Was her love for her future husband of that pure and holy kind which would kindle the fires of family affection on that new hearth? was it the love without which married life is indeed a snare and a delusion? Grace was

very far-seeing; but she loved Petronel so deeply, so blindly, that she could not bring herself to acknowledge her fears in the matter.

“If it were any other girl of my acquaintance, I should say it could only be his rank and future title that she was thinking of; but I believe better things of Petronel. I believe she has a deeper, better nature, though it is so difficult to get at. She must love him, or she never would have accepted him,” thought she. But she was wrong, even where she most wished to be right. Petronel was not by any means worthy of Mr. Poyns. His was a true, loyal nature, while hers was a weak, shifty one. He was influenced by true love, while she was entirely led away by ambition.

Perhaps the one of all the lookers-on

who saw most of the game was Major Armstrong.

He recognised every phase of *le grand jeu*, as he had seen it played before.

He knew the stakes for which it was played, and he watched the moves with a grim certainty of what would come next, which was almost painful in its vividness.

It was the same piece he had seen before, only played by different actors, on a different stage.

Major Armstrong was not one of those people who wear their hearts upon their sleeves, and ostentatiously call the attention of the passers-by to the fact that the daws are pecking at them; on the contrary he had gone to the other extreme, and seeking neither comfort nor sympathy among his fellows, he had taken desolate self-dependence and cold

distrust for his bosom-companions. He imagined that all his natural affections having been chilled, he could be satisfied by this bare and frozen life.

But he forgot that extremes meet, and that the ice in the Polar regions burns like fire if you grasp it unawares. Fancying himself hard as a nether mill-stone, he was in reality extremely tender-hearted.

Very early the next morning Major Armstrong rose, and tempted by the beauty of the scene which he saw from his bed-room window, he set out for a solitary ramble.

Though the keen sense and susceptibility of enjoyment had been left behind by him on life's track, yet scenery had still power to wake a good deal of his sympathy.

In things of the world—things made by man, our senses become deadened to the

capacity of enjoyment, and our taste, after a time, grows fastidious, and we become more difficult to please, and more observant of blemishes.

But there are no blemishes in Nature, and her loveliness increases instead of diminishes as we gaze on her year after year.

The early morning light was touching up points in the landscape, and the misty curtain was rolling back from the hills as he descended to the glen beneath the house.

Pursuing his way by the river's side he soon passed the farm, the mill, and the outlying cottages of the village, and found himself in a lonely district, of which perfect solitude was the prevailing characteristic.

The range of hills opened out gradually to his view as he kept along the river's

brink. Every moment the outline changed, and the variations in light were marvellous.

Here a line of hills clothed in purple, crimson, and yellow tints broke upon the view; there a group of pines stood out in clear relief, whilst a singular green-coloured sky behind them added to their beauty by force of contrast. The sheep browsing on the mountain sides, and the cattle in the fields showed as mere specks.

“What a shame it is to waste these lovely morning hours in bed, as one generally does!” said Major Armstrong to himself, as he paused in his walk to take in the glorious scene before him.

One solitary figure was coming towards him as he looked round again and was continuing his walk, one solitary figure of a man, and it did not take long before

Major Armstrong had recognised it as that of his old servant, Donald Inverarity.

He looked so sad and strange, that Major Armstrong was quite struck with the alteration in his appearance.

“Hallo! Donald, my man,” he exclaimed. “What’s wrong with you now? Are there poachers about?”

“Ay, Sir! plenty, but it is not them that is troubling me.”

“What is it then, Donald?” asked Major Armstrong kindly; “if there is any way in which I can help you, I shall be very pleased to do so. You had better make a clean breast of it, for the sake of old times.”

“Thank you, Sir,” said Donald. “I think I shall leave this place and go and knock about the world again.”

“What is that for?” said Major Armstrong. “It was but the other day that

you told me you liked your situation so much, and that it was a matter of great importance for you to have employment in your own native valley.”

“I know it, Sir; and so I thought then, but I have changed my mind since then,” said Donald.

He looked so sad and dispirited, that Major Armstrong was certain that something had gone very much amiss with him.

“Donald,” he said, laying his hand kindly on the young man’s shoulder. “Do you remember how you nursed me as tenderly as a woman when I was down with the fever at Beyrout? and then, when I got better I made you promise that if ever the time should come when you should stand in need of a friend, you would come to me?”

“Indeed, Sir, you were always a kind

master, and I know you would help me if you could, but I fear this is a wound too deep and too sore for you to heal."

"Let us see it, my man, the physician must not pronounce a case hopeless till he knows the cause of the malady," said Major Armstrong.

Little by little, through kind words and gentle sympathy, Major Armstrong extracted the fact that it was jealousy that made Donald so unhappy.

"But you say she told you that she had begged this gentleman-lover not to go near her again," said Major Armstrong, "surely if she has done that you have no reason to blame her."

"She says so now, Sir," said Donald ; "but she may be deceiving me. I'm not the first fool that has been gulled by a woman, and I shall not be the last."

"If she has never deceived you before,

Donald," said his master, "I really think you are very wrong to doubt her now, without more proof than you seem to have of her falsehood."

Donald continued moodily silent. He had a slight switch in his hand, and he was employed in knocking off the heads of some thistles which grew in the hedge.

His whole mind seemed bent on his work, and he struck viciously at the stalks one by one, till they fell beneath his blows.

"Come, Donald, you must tell me all if you want me to help you. Why is it that you seem to have made up your mind so entirely that the girl prefers your rival to you?" said Major Armstrong.

"Sir, is it likely that the servant should be preferred before his master? Is it likely that when the gay young laird comes a-wooing, the lassie will have any

thoughts to spare for the likes of me?" said Donald, leaving his thistles abruptly, and turning round so as fully to face Major Armstrong.

"The laird!" said Major Armstrong, in astonishment, "you don't mean that!"

"Indeed I do, Sir," said Donald bitterly. "It is my own master, Sir Archibald Morton, who has supplanted me, so now you see why it is that I must leave this place. I can no longer serve such a man."

Major Armstrong was silent; he was thinking the subject out, and there was a look in his eyes which Donald knew well. It meant, "Don't interrupt me, if you'll only have patience, I'll give you the best advice in my power."

So Donald quietly waited till his old master's reverie should come to a natural end, knowing quite well that if any good

was possible, it would be at his service in due time.

There was a certain superiority of intellectual vigour about Major Armstrong, which caused men of all ranks and ages to rely on his judgment. Donald had perfect faith in him, he had seen him in war and in peace, in public and in private, and he knew that he was thoroughly to be depended upon. Donald loved his late master dearly, and would willingly have shed his life's blood in his service.

In spite of Brothers Bright and Beale, and of the Communists of France, we venture to assert that feudalism as a feeling has not yet died away in England.

It may be that in the bustle and traffic of the age, it is dying out in thickly populated districts, and that it is considered one of the fast-disappearing relics

of an antique faith, but in rural places, in sequestered corners, which the highways and railways have missed, the sentiment still remains.

Donald's mother had been brought up on the Armstrong estate, and her father and grandfather before her had worked for "t'auld Squire."

It is said that her uncle, who was parish-clerk for upwards of thirty years, could never, to the end of his life, conceal his agitation when he observed, from the vestry window, the stately form of General Armstrong coming down the foot-path to the church.

"He's a-coming," he would whisper, on such occasions, to the parson, and then regardless of the folds of the surplice he was arranging, he would rush incontinently out with bated breath and place himself in the porch to receive the

august visitor with due reverence. To Donald's eyes, therefore, Major Armstrong was a very important personage; he had been "born in the purple," and as such deserved hereditary and traditional respect. But, besides this public acknowledgment of his fealty, Donald loved him sincerely on his own account, so he waited in silent expectation for the words of wisdom, which he doubted not would fall from his lips.

CHAPTER III.

“The world is too much with us ; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers,
 Little we see in nature that is ours.”

WORDSWORTH.

MAJOR ARMSTRONG, in his abstraction, turned aside from the level path by the river, and began to ascend a sort of aboriginal track-way, over hill and dale, rudely marked out by stones, laid at intervals.

Violent rains had cut deep furrows in the soil, and during the Winter the path was evidently a water-course, where it was not a bog.

But, rough walking though it was, there was a beauty of its own in this "path across the hills;" heather and golden gorse had strayed down from the moorlands above to visit it, and the lichen-covered rocks glowed with many-hued loveliness.

In one place was a tangle of convolvulus and honeysuckle, while at the distance of of a few feet, a bright emerald thread streaked the heath-clad hill, and told of the birthplace of a tributary stream which was wending its way to the river below. It was a beautiful place in which to "gather the harvest of a quiet eye," and very rich spoils indeed might the gleaner have obtained therein, but the two men now climbing the rough mountain side were not thinking of the scenes before them.

Arrived at a level shelf in the hill-side,

Major Armstrong paused, and turning round abruptly, plunged at once into the subject on which he had been meditating.

He told Donald that his story coincided in every particular to the signs he had noted in Sir Archibald Morton's manner.

"There is something wrong with him, you may depend upon it, Donald," he said, "there is a look in his eyes that I have never seen except in the eyes of one who has had a grievous disappointment! Depend upon it your love is a true-hearted girl, and is faithful to you."

"Would to God I could believe you are right, Sir!" said Donald.

"If you don't believe me, go and prove it for yourself, Donald," said Major Armstrong; "don't give in at once, like that; all girls are not so false and worldly as you in your mad jealousy would make out. It is my firm belief that you have nothing

to fear in that quarter; if what you say is true about the laird's frequent visits to the house, you may rely upon it that her having told you she had begged him to stay away, combined with his altered looks and sad and absent manner, mean that she has sent him to the right about."

"Please, Sir, do not torture me with false hopes," said Donald piteously.

"False hopes, indeed, false fiddle-sticks! Why, Donald, I never thought that you, who were such a brave soldier and faced the Russian guns so manfully, would turn pale and wince at the idea of a woman's falsehood. Fair play is a jewel, and it does not strike me that you have dealt fairly by her," said Major Armstrong.

"I have been true to her till I had reason to believe she was playing me false, Sir," said Donald, "and now I should be only thankful to hear that

I had been mistaken in my judgment."

"Yes; but why, if you were engaged to the girl did you stay away from the house so long as to give the laird, or any-one else, the chance of cutting you out?" said Major Armstrong.

"Ah! Sir! that is not my fault," said Donald, and he related the false and cruel accusation which Andrew Macpherson had made against his father—an accusation which he most thoroughly disbelieved, and yet which he could not disprove at present, for the reason that the most important witness in the matter was missing.

"What has made him take such an idea into his head?" said Major Armstrong.

"It was some row, Sir, about a still there used to be in these parts, I fancy, when my father was employed by the excise, that is all I can gather at present; but I

no more believe that my father was engaged in any foul play than I could believe evil of you, Sir."

"Thank you, Donald, for your good opinion of me," said Major Armstrong, "but if I were you, I would leave no stone unturned to sift this matter to the bottom. I know too well what a good woman your mother was, to be easily made to believe evil of your father; but what makes you imagine that the story arose from the fact of the illicit distilling of whisky?"

"I have been cross-questioning a good many people, Sir, since Andrew Macpherson set upon me in that cruel way, and ordered me out of his house. I wanted to clear my name and my reputation, for Janet's sake, but I might have spared my breath and my trouble for aught she cares about the matter," said he.

"There you go again, jumping at con-

clusions, Donald," said Major Armstrong, "it would be more manly for you to go to the girl and tax her with your suspicions, and have it out with her openly, instead of slandering her behind her back."

Donald was silent, but he was relenting. Major Armstrong could see by his face that the good leaven was at work within him.

He therefore continued without waiting for Donald to speak. "I don't understand why, as you had been forbidden to go to the house, and had stayed away for so long a time, you should have gone again yesterday?"

"I went on an errand from the laird," said Donald, "little thinking what I was doing, and that he had chosen me as a messenger between them to complete my punishment."

"Now, Donald, that is nonsense. I am

ashamed to hear you talk like that. Sir Archibald Morton is a gentleman every inch of him, and if he had had the slightest idea that the errand would have been a painful one to you, depend upon it he would have chosen some other messenger."

"Well, Sir, I believe that you are right, and I'll not be above confessing that I was glad of the excuse to see Janet, so at the time I was pleased the laird sent me there," said Donald.

"That is right, Donald, that is spoken more like yourself. I can understand how you feel perfectly, but I am not going to allow you to float down the stream of discontent, without holding out a plank to save you from drowning," said Major Armstrong.

"I would catch hold of a straw, Sir, if you would hold it for me," said Donald.

“Will you trust me to go and speak to her for you?” said Major Armstrong.

“Indeed, Sir, I should be only too grateful, if you would only take the trouble,” said Donald.

“You must remember one thing, Donald, I am at present the guest of Sir Archibald Morton, and I am not going to turn myself into a spy on his actions even to serve you. Whatever I do, I will do openly, and if you will trust me I will see if I cannot get matters arranged for you,” said Major Armstrong; “and now I must get back to the house, or I shall be late for breakfast, and they will be wondering what has become of me.”

It was Sunday morning, and as they returned through the village, they found house-doors open, and a certain amount of respectable bustle going on, indicating the preparations for church-going.

“If I were not behind the scenes,” thought the Major, “I should have set down this village as being a sort of ‘Sweet Auburn,’ a place where contentment and innocence reigned supreme, and where the crimes and sorrows of the world were unknown; but I have to-day heard of envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness, besides a cloud of suspected murder hanging darkly in the distance. Heigh ho! appearances are certainly deceitful. I should not have thought the devil knew his way to this happy valley, but he seems to be as busy here as elsewhere.”

Major Armstrong had been by no means unmoved at the sight of Donald's distress. It recalled passages of equal suffering in his own life, which he had thought buried and at rest for ever.

The ice which had seemed to close

round his heart, was rapidly melting beneath the warm rays of sympathy.

After all, cynicism is only one of the many forms of selfishness which exist.

When Diogenes took up his residence in that tub of his, he knew perfectly well that instead of shunning other men, he was only trying a new dodge to attract their attention.

The very idea of a philosopher living in a tub would bring him into notice—or, as we say now, “before the public.” He knew that Alexander would come to see him, and that their interview would be reported in the ‘Court Journal’ of the period. Had he been wise enough to discard his tub, except for the purposes of ablution (of which I doubt not he stood in need), and lived amongst men, employing his talents for their service, we

should never have heard of him, or his ridiculous lantern either, but he would have been a happier, better, and cleaner man. Major Armstrong's abuse of the world had been to a great extent mere talk. He was always ready to recognize real worth, and always willing to lend a helping hand whenever it was needed. As soon as he had begun to throw himself out of himself, out of his own troubles, to the contemplation of the joys and sorrows of others, the indescribable mixture of opposite sentiments which stifled and oppressed him, began to die away.

He came back softened and moved by the good deed he had been doing, in endeavouring to clear from Donald's eyes the cloud of causeless distrust which was hanging like a pall between him and the light, and he entered straightway into

the presence of Petronel and her newly-betrothed lord.

It was a severe test to his newly discovered principles, no doubt. Mr. Poyns was blissfully, calmly, and contentedly in love, and ready to do any possible or impossible thing, at a moment's notice, to suit the whims of his enslaver. He was not to be pitied, at present, at all events. He seemed perfectly satisfied with his position.

As for Petronel, she was forging chains for herself with dexterous hands. Golden fetters perhaps, but gold is heavier in the main than iron, and binds down the soul with stronger force than ever did iron manacle bind the limbs of a slave or a convict.

He thought of her in the future, and pictured her to himself, bound by her own self-made links to despair and dis-

satisfaction. She was about, of her own free will, to sign those terrible indentures by which we are bound in the most lasting apprenticeship life has to offer. It was with her eyes open that she was doing so, and, as Major Armstrong recollected this, he checked himself in his moralizing, saying mentally,

“ Well, the tide rolled on in spite of King Canute, and the world will go on its own way, in spite of the meddling individuals who try to stop or change its course. The king’s men may lead the king’s horses to the water, but His Majesty himself, crown, sceptre, and all, cannot make them drink unless they are, as Mrs. Gamp would say, ‘so dispoged.’ ”

The engagement between Mr. Poyns and Petronel was now formally announced, and a shower of congratulations fell on all sides.

Petronel was like a queen who expected to receive homage, and no doubt derived intense satisfaction from the accomplishment of this formula.

Her beautiful face changed not, the finely chiselled features, the large eyes, the clustering wealth of golden hair proclaimed her, it is true, the Queen of Beauty; but there was a want of something which haunted you, vexed you, you knew not why, as you looked at her.

Perhaps it was of sweetness; but yet what could be more sweet than the dimples at the corner of that exquisite mouth? Perhaps it was strength? But no! there was no want of power in the chin—no weakness in that marble brow.

There is an intangible something not to be defined by physiognomical signs, which is absolutely necessary to render a countenance (however beautiful) per-

fectly satisfactory, and that something was missing from Petronel's face,

The want was felt by Major Armstrong, but till that particular morning he had never been able to account for the feeling.

Now it came upon him like a flash of lightning. It was want of heart! Her whole being and her whole object in life was self.

She had been so spoiled and flattered in the world, so adored as a beauty, that she thought nothing too good for her, and went on day after day in the firm conviction that everything and everybody must bow to her imperial will.

“And so, my dear Major, it is all up with Poyns” said Mrs. Becket, as she stood before a pier-glass in the drawing-room arranging her bonnet before going to church.

"It has been announced, I hear," said Major Armstrong. "Well, I suppose no one is surprised at it! We all saw pretty clearly what was impending"

"Yes, we are not all blind beetles," said Mrs. Becket. "Even I, being for my time of life very young and very green, had my suspicions that the prospect of the Delabole title and estates would prove a bait sufficient to make my lady nibble."

"You to talk about being innocent and green, Mrs. Becket!" said Major Armstrong. "I think if everybody had such sharp eyes and such sharp wits as you have, there would not be many secrets left to conceal."

"*Que voulez-vous?*" said Mrs. Becket. "One must amuse oneself; some people take delight in balls, some in horse-racing; but my pleasure is in watching

the movements of the marionettes which act in the drama we call 'Life.' "

Lady Morton entered the room at this moment, followed by the rest of her guests all ready for church, so the conversation between these two wide-awake worldlings ceased.

The "kirk" was in the village close at hand, and, as there was no episcopal church within many miles, the Lashiels party took up their position in the front seat of the gallery, opposite the pulpit, which of course was the central object of attraction.

The best seats were reserved for families of distinction, and the preacher was so placed that the wealthy proprietors, or as they would call themselves "heritors," were within his range of vision.

All round the gallery was a broad

ledge, covered with crimson cloth, and on this ledge lay a number of large and handsomely bound Bibles.

The Macphersons' pew was in the nethermost regions, where the humbler folk literally sat under the minister.

It was placed side-ways, so that only Janet's delicate profile was visible to those seated in the gallery.

But many were the glances cast upon her from on high.

Archie with his arms folded on his breast gazed sadly and longingly at that sweet face; and Major Armstrong, full of the story he had heard that morning from Donald Inverarity, looked at her with scarcely less interest. He was, as I have already said, a great physiognomist; and before the end of "sixteenthly and lastly," he had come to the conclusion that there was very little

chance for Archie, and a great deal for Donald.

There was a sweetness about the lip, that told of a tender loving nature, while both the brow and chin proved that there was neither vacillation nor weakness in her character.

The singing was primitive, and perhaps possessed charms for those who imagine simplicity and discord synonymous terms.

There was no instrument to lead the voices; a "kist of whistles," as the villagers called an organ, having been offered them by Archie, but having been refused as ungodly by the astute and large minded body calling themselves the kirk-session.

The precentor "pitched" the long psalms and paraphrases, and the congregation joined in when and how they

could; something on the principle of the Caucas race in Wonderland, when every one begins when he likes and ends when he likes, and each has the pleasing consciousness that he has won the race.

As for Mr. Poyns he was in the seventh heaven of delight; he was sitting next to Petronel, and thus publicly acknowledged as her betrothed.

I know not if he was given mentally to quote poetry, but had he done so on that occasion, it is probable that it would have been :

“Long was the good man’s sermon,
But it seemed not long to me,
For he spoke of Ruth the beautiful,
And still I dreamed of thee.”

Was Petronel worth the love and almost adoration he lavished upon her? We shall see. As was once said of a

similar character, she was her own centre, her own circumference, her movements all sprung from one central point ; that point was self.

CHAPTER IV.

“Trifles light as air,
Are, to the jealous, confirmation strong
As proofs of Holy Writ.”

SHAKSPEARE.

MAJOR ARMSTRONG was sorely exercised in his mind as to his self-imposed task.

How was he to talk to Janet Macpherson? That was the puzzle.

In the first place what excuse could he make for going to see her? And then, supposing that difficulty to be surmounted, what was he to say to her? He began to repent his good-nature.

and to wish himself out of the business altogether.

But it was too late for that. He had promised Donald to act in the matter, and being a man of his word he was not going to draw back.

The delicate profile he had watched so attentively in church haunted him, and he said to himself, more than once that afternoon: "Small blame to Archie for being smitten with that girl; she is surprisingly beautiful, and so refined looking." He had a double reason for wishing that the breach should be healed between her and Donald.

First for Donald's own sake, for he had been a faithful servant to him, and, as faithful servants are, a true friend to him also. He would like to leave Lashiels, feeling at least that Donald was the happier for his visit there.

Then, seeing how dangerously fascinating Janet was, all unconsciously he felt that the effectual barrier of her known engagement to Donald could not too soon be raised.

He knew enough of the character of Sir Archibald Morton to feel sure that, as a man of honour, when once he knew that Janet really loved another, he would abandon all pursuit of her, cost him what such a course might.

But then, on the other hand, Donald had so speedily displayed his jealousy, had treated her (by his own admission) so roughly, that was it not quite possible that, from pique and offended vanity, he might himself have driven her into the very course he so dreaded her taking?

“He is a blundering fellow, and has done his best to spoil his own sport,”

thought he; "but, if it were not that I wish to see him happy, I must do my best in the matter, as such a marriage would be social perdition to the laird."

He was strengthened in his resolution to put his finger in the pie that Sunday afternoon, by seeing Archie's set face and intent gaze upon the blue gauzy column of smoke that rose among the trees, and which he rightly imagined issued from the farm-chimneys.

Everyone was lounging about that afternoon; some were seated in the house, some in the garden, and the prevailing influence seemed to be a drowsy one.

A long sermon on a hot Sunday in July is apt to have rather a soporific effect, and with Mrs. Becket there was not even a pretence of wakefulness. She lay back in an arm-chair in the library,

with a pamphlet in her hand which she was supposed to be reading, but the obligato accompaniment of a wind instrument gave audible proof that her slumbers were profound.

Lady Morton had a number of 'Good Words' held very close to her near-sighted eyes, but she seemed hardly more wakeful than her usually lively guest.

The Anstruthers and Lady Violet had retired to their own apartments, and Grace had gone to the village school to teach her usual Sunday class of young women.

The gentlemen were either in the smoking-room or in the garden, so Major Armstrong stepped away from them, and climbing down the steep mossy steps where Lady Violet had once fallen and sprained her ankle, he wended his way to the valley below.

He had not proceeded far before he met Grace returning from her labours in the school.

“What a walker you are, Major Armstrong!” said she. “You were out for hours this morning, and now you are starting off again.”

“I am not going very far now, Miss Morton,” said he. “I am only going to the farm.”

Grace turned and looked at him; could it be that he too was smitten with the charms of this rustic beauty who had worked such a serious amount of havoc in the heart of Archie?

Major Armstrong saw in an instant, by Grace's look, that she too knew something about this young damsel he was going to seek.

Quick as a lightning flash came the thought that here was a valuable aide-de-

camp; that through Grace Morton's help he might be able speedily to disentangle the provokingly mysterious web by which Donald Inverarity was hampered.

"I am bound on an errand which is not in my line, Miss Morton," he said.

"Indeed!" said Grace, glancing quickly at him with those clever grey eyes of hers which seemed to see so much.

"Yes, Miss Morton," he continued, "it is rather hard on an old bachelor to be sent with messages from ardent lovers to their lady-loves, but I am now going to the farm to see a young woman named Janet Macpherson, with whom it seems my old servant, Donald Inverarity, has had a quarrel, which appears to proceed on his part from jealousy."

"Is that Donald the underkeeper?" said Grace. "I have heard of this girl; is she engaged to Donald?"

The story was getting interesting, and Grace listened, almost breathless from excitement.

“ She has been engaged to Donald in a sort of way for some time, I believe,” said Major Armstrong, “ and I am sure he is really devoted to her still, though in his mad jealousy he pretends to believe she is false. It appears that he has found out that in his absence she has become an object of interest to one in a far higher rank of life than his own, and he has taken it into his foolish head that she prefers this new lover to him. I cannot beat the idea out of his silly brain that she is fickle, and is encouraging his richer and more exalted rival.”

Grace's face flushed, and her breath grew short while he spoke; when he ceased, she laid her hand suddenly on his arm and said.

“Major Armstrong, I am not at liberty to tell you all I know of this strange story; but this much I think I ought to say, Donald need not fear his rival, for Janet has refused him. She has acted as a girl with honour and right feeling would act, and I have no doubt myself that she is faithful to her early love.”

“Thank you, Miss Morton, for telling me this much,” said Major Armstrong. “I will not ask you to say more, you have made my task a great deal easier; I shall now be able to tell Donald to go and make it up with this beautiful Janet.”

“Oh, I do hope you will succeed, and that these two good souls may very shortly be happily married,” she replied.

“I have no doubt you do, Mademoiselle,” thought Major Armstrong, as he lifted his hat courteously and left her.

“She has refused him, has she?”

thought he, as he paced along the river's brink. "Well done, Janet Macpherson, you are a true woman, and if Donald does not take care I shall have to tell him that he is not worthy of you! So you have refused to marry the laird; the greatest man of your acquaintance, and no doubt from your limited knowledge of the world, one who stands at least as high as a member of the Royal Family would in your estimation!

"Depend upon it, Archie has been confiding all his troubles to his sister, like a sensible fellow; I am sure she would give him good advice, and love and sympathy too, which is much more valuable. How often I wish I had a sister in whom I could confide; but I stand alone in the world, alas!"

Musing thus, he paced the green walk by the river, seeing, without being con-

scious of them, many lovely sights. There was a shindy going on between two lively little brown squirrels over a treasure hoard, which one of them had laid up the year before in the hollow of a tree, and which the other now wanted to rob.

Teeth and claws were both used in defence of the valuable store, and the victor remained proudly by the hollow tree, while the vanquished climbed the branches of a neighbouring elm, and was soon lost to sight among its branches.

Then the dragon-flies had got on their Sunday dresses, and were looking admiringly at their own reflection in the clear water. While below lay a huge large trout, who knew too well the Sabbatarian tendencies of the inhabitants of the valley, to indulge in any foolish fears regarding his own safety on that blessed day of rest.

He was a wide-awake old trout too, and as he lay calmly winking with one eye among the reeds, who can say how much or how little he understood of what was going on in the world in which his natural enemy, man, reigned supreme?

All this Major Armstrong saw, but his mind was so busy with other thoughts that he took no heed of outward scenes. He was immensely relieved at what Grace had told him; he should now be able to assure Donald that it would be his own fault if he did not go in and win, as that Janet had refused the laird was a very evident proof that she was true to him.

He had not walked as far as the wooden bridge of which Grace had made such use in her drawing, when he came suddenly upon Donald for the second time that day.

“Hallo! Donald, you were the very

man I most wished to see. I have news for you, news which you ought to be uncommonly grateful to me for bringing you," said he.

"What is it, Sir?" said Donald.

"Why, that you have misjudged and mistrusted as true-hearted a girl as ever stepped! Donald, you are a fool! an idiot! a long-eared jack-ass! Why, man, the laird asked her to be his wife, and she refused him; so now, if she turns against you, you have only your own confounded folly and jealousy to thank for the change."

"The laird has asked her to marry him, and she has refused?" gasped Donald.

"Yes, man! you need not look so scared! of course she has, and what better reason could she have for doing so than that her heart was no longer hers to give, but that she had bestowed it

long ago on a villain who was not half worthy of her ?”

Donald had always been most respectful in his manner to his old master hitherto. His respect for him, founded on hereditary tradition, knew no bounds. But now, as Major Armstrong spoke these words, the impulse of joyful gratitude which woke within his soul was too real to be repressed within the bounds of correct and humble thankfulness.

He rushed forward, and seizing Major Armstrong by the hand, began to stammer forth his delight.

“Don’t thank me, Donald,” said Major Armstrong, “don’t thank me, but go to the young woman and explain yourself, tell her honestly that you know you have behaved like a suspicious and unbelieving scoundrel, and ask her to forgive you. You had better look sharp about it too.

It may not be too late now, but it is quite possible that it may be so, if you leave it till to-morrow."

Donald needed no second bidding, he was off like a shot, and before Major Armstrong had realised that his hand was still tingling from the pressure it had received, Donald had passed the bridge and was well on in the path beyond, leading to the farm.

In spite of his benevolence, there was a touch of sternness in Major Armstrong's nature, which was far more real than his pretended cynicism.

He was feeling really vexed with Donald for his treatment of Janet; for though he did not know her, his sympathies were ever with the weak, and he had been much taken with her countenance that morning in the village church.

Hers was the face of a tender, true-

hearted woman—one born to suffer and to endure her just measure of the troubles of this life, doubtless, but one in whom faith would ever rise triumphantly over prejudice, and who would be capable of crushing falsehood and pride by her pure and simple life.

He followed Donald unconsciously across the foot-bridge, then rousing himself as he perceived he was on the private path leading to the farm, he made a left wheel, and turned into the public village-road.

As he walked along in deep meditation, his face wore an absorbed, absent air, which had the effect of making him look undeniably churlish. At least so thought a group of country lads and lasses who were wandering along the road in couples, according to the approved habit of villagers on a Sunday. The maidens eyed

him askance, and whispered amongst themselves of his grave looks; but he just walked straight on, and took no more heed of them than he would have done of a flock of sheep.

“Poor Archie!” he was thinking, “I wonder what he would say if he knew what I have been doing with myself to-day. I am glad to see that I have not quite lost my old promptness in action, though I must say the Fates certainly helped me to-day in a most wonderful manner. I was afraid I was getting too liberal, and too far-seeing, to be prompt. The more we look forward to the consequences of our acts, the less prompt we are to perform them. I have often thought that children are the wisest of human beings after all, for they do at once, whatever their first impulse bids them, and ten chances to

one through life, that the first impulse is the best."

He was relieved to find that he need not now go to the farm, or face Janet at all, as Donald and she were quite capable of making up their quarrel without his aid.

He therefore sauntered back to the house, and made himself as pleasant and agreeable that evening as usual. No one could judge from his manner that he was in possession of a secret, the revelation of which would have the same effect in that peaceful circle, as if an explosive bomb should suddenly burst in the room.

Only once in the course of the evening, happening to get near Grace, he whispered,

"I believe it is all right, Miss Morton,

Donald is all anxiety now to make up for his fit of jealous rage."

"Did you see her?" said Grace.

"No, I sent him to her, as I thought they could make it up better between themselves, than if a third person came between them," said he.

"I dare say you are right," said Grace.

"I shall see him to-morrow, I have no doubt, and then I shall hear if he has received forgiveness after having made the *amende* in a properly humble spirit," said he, and there the conversation dropped.

Those few words had however comforted Grace extremely. She went to bed that night, with sincere wishes in her heart for the happy marriage of this young couple, whose love affairs had been thrust so strangely upon her

notice. She was glad to think that in three days' time they were to move to Glen-Auchmuty, and that all danger of her brother's meeting with Janet Macpherson would be removed for some months at all events. In the meantime, she devoutly hoped that Janet and Donald might be happily married.

She knew nothing about the objection entertained by Andrew Macpherson to the match; so having comfortably settled it all in her mind, she went to bed and slept the sleep of the just.

Early the next morning Captain Burns and Mr. Green went back to their regiment at Carlisle, and in the course of the day the Anstruthers departed also, carrying off Lady Violet with them.

Mrs. Becket was to leave the next day, but Mr. Poyns, on the strength of his acknowledged position as a future son

of the house, was staying on, and was to move with the family to Glen-Auchmuty.

Major Armstrong was driven by Archie to the house of Colonel Power, one of his Crimean friends, with whom he had promised to take a yachting cruise.

Before they started however, he found time for half-an-hour's chat with Donald Inverarity, and was glad to learn from him that he had made it up with Janet, and that she was the truest hearted, most faithful girl in the whole universe.

"In this 'varsal world," Donald had said, and the expression apparently pleased him so much, that he repeated it more than once with renewed emphasis.

Satisfied with the result of his mission, and much pleased to see again the old,

frank expression on his former servant's face, Major Armstrong left Lashiels wondering much that he, to whom life and life's drama were so familiar, should find himself so strangely stirred and interested by the doings of the people in that little peaceful village.

CHAPTER V.

“And wheresoever he appeared
Full twenty times was Peter feared,
For once that Peter was respected.”

WORDSWORTH.

IT was all very well for Janet and Donald to make up their differences. All very well, and a great comfort it doubtless was to them both that they had done so, but that did not bring their wedding-day a bit nearer as far as they could see.

Andrew Macpherson seemed to have an invincible hatred of Donald—a hatred

the more vivid and profound, because he was totally unable to explain the root from which it sprung. When Donald, emboldened by his newly found happiness, and by the advice of his late master, ventured again to the farm on Monday evening, Andrew, in his semi-conscious state was so excited at the mere sound of his voice, in the court-yard below his bedroom window, that his wife and Susan, who were watching beside him, were afraid that he would have another fit.

“Go and send him away, Susan,” and Susan obeyed nothing loth.

Susan had her own opinions on the subject of her sister's conduct, and was apt, in the secret recesses of her heart, to stigmatise Janet as “a fool for her pains.”

Her sharp eyes had not lost any of the outward and visible signs of Sir Archi-

bald Morton's love for Janet, her sharp ears had caught many remarks made by neighbours on the subject, and her sharp wits had enabled her to arrive at a tolerably just conclusion as to the real state of the case.

Running downstairs lightly, with a scornful expression on her handsome face, and a little look of spiteful pleasure at the task before her, she came upon Donald and Janet as they stood in the angle of the wall near the rose trees.

It was just the same spot on which the laird had pleaded so earnestly with Janet, just the very place where he begged for the fairest rose in the garden to wear next his heart for ever.

Janet remembered it as she stood there with Donald, and in her heart of hearts she felt that no rank, no wealth,

no gratified pride and ambition could compensate to her for the loss of Donald's love. It was hers truly and devotedly, she felt sure of it now, and she valued it more than ever from the knowledge that she had so nearly lost it.

"And you are still of the same mind, Janet, as you were last evening," Donald was saying as Susan came up to them.

Janet had not time to speak, but gave him a loving, trusting look, and he was satisfied.

"Janet, you are wanted," said Susan coming abruptly upon them, and ignoring Donald with the most evident intention.

"And I am not, I suppose that means," said Donald, laughing; he was in great good-humour and was determined not to be put out by anything

that could be said or done to him; besides which he looked upon Susan as a child, and could not realise the fact that she was, in her own estimation at all events, a young woman.

Susan much offended by his tone, drew herself up and replied rather scornfully, "Janet is wanted in the house, and I should think you probably were wanted elsewhere, and at all events this is no place for you!"

"Susan! how can you speak so?" said Janet, indignantly. "I wonder at you."

"I wonder at *you*, Janet," said Susan, "standing talking to Donald because poor father is too ill in the bed to stop you—you know you would not venture to do so if he were up and about!"

"Your father has taken an unfounded and unnatural prejudice against me,

Susan," said Donald, "but Janet knows me better than he does, and has determined to trust me through it all, and to stand by me through thick and thin."

"To be sure, Donald," said Janet, gently, "but perhaps Susan is right, and I ought not to take advantage of father's illness to do what he does not approve of."

"I must go I suppose," said Donald, making a comical grimace, and bowing low to Susan, in a playful manner that was extremely galling to that young person's sense of her own dignity and importance.

Donald was so secure in his own innocence, and in the certainty that Andrew Macpherson was wrong in the accusation he had made against his dead father, that he could not even

realise that, having been positively forbidden the house by Janet's father, he had no right to come until the veto had been removed.

He took his leave of Janet therefore very affectionately, but with an air of much greater security than Susan thought he had any right to assume.

"Upon my word he is a cool hand!" said Susan, with a little disdainful toss of her head, as she watched Donald's departure.

Janet said nothing, she was leaning on the grey stone wall just where he had left her. Her eyes looked sad and wondering, her delicate profile stood out clear against the evening sky! The roses were drooping now, their day was well nigh over, and they hung their heads mournfully, as if grieving over the scattered

petals of their former companions which strewn the ground at their feet.

Janet heeded not her sister, so intent was she on her own thoughts; and the steadfast gaze of her expressive eyes might have told an observant looker-on, that she was trying to see into the far off and unknown future of her life; trying to pierce those cloud-curtains, which, happily for us, are hung between us and the undreamed of evil to come. Susan did not in the least degree understand her sister, to her strong practical mind day-dreams were vain and useless things, mere traps for the wasting of precious time.

Janet's heart was, and was ever likely to remain, a sealed book to her, and as time went on and each of their minds developed, they grew more and more apart.

"I cannot understand you, Janet," said

Susan, "I cannot understand what you can find in Donald Inverarity to make you brave father and mother's anger, just for a few words of mouth-speech with him. Come in now, do, mother is in a pretty way with you I can tell you for encouraging him about the place."

Janet turned round at these hard, cold words.

The golden and rosy light was dying out of the sunset clouds, and what had been brightness would now very shortly be gloom.

Was it an omen for her future? Was it a sign that the grim dark shadows of sorrow and of suffering were to gather thickly over the landscape of her life, and hide the joyous Spring tints of light, and joy, and love in their gloom?

"Why did you speak so strangely and so unkindly to Donald?" said Janet, as

she turned to follow her sister to the house.

“Why? because I have my senses about me, Janet! because I know what is right and proper and fit, and I am not like you, clean demented, with a fancy for a young man whom father hates, and for whom nevertheless you are willing to give up a wonderful chance of rising in the world,” said Susan.

“Rising in the world!” said Janet, “I am supposed to give up a great deal for Donald’s sake, am I?”

“You are very foolish to do it, but it is none the less true that you have done so, Janet,” said Susan, “and I am sure I don’t wonder at mother’s being so vexed with you. To think of your refusing to marry the laird, merely because you have a silly fancy for a lad you used to play with when you were a child!”

“Susan ! you don’t understand what you are talking about,” said Janet, gently, willing to change the subject, and to avoid disputes and discussions which could lead to nothing but to further estrangement in the family.

“ *I* don’t understand what *I* am talking about, don’t *I* ?” said Susan, “upon my word, Janet, you are very civil ! I suppose you think you are the only member of the family who has any wits, but I can tell you I have some too, and mine don’t go wool-gathering as yours do.”

“Susie dear ! don’t talk so,” said Janet, winding her arms affectionately round her sister’s waist.

She was so happy, so full of a tender thrilling joy which she could not describe, that harsh and unkind words seemed to her to belong to some far away planet, and to have nothing whatever to do with

the world of happiness in which she was dwelling.

Something in her face, or her voice, or her manner (she could not tell which, perhaps all three), touched Susan's usually flinty heart. A new revelation broke in upon her. What if the goods which the worldlings prize so highly are in reality mere tinsel, and what if the true love that shone in Janet's eyes and warbled in her sweet voice was the real great and lasting good!

Susan was a matter-of-fact young woman. She took things as they came, without much looking back, and without much looking forward; bearing the frets and trials of daily life with the exemplary patience of a dumb animal. Sincerity and coolness were two strongly marked characteristics in her mind, and as to worrying herself about the complexity of

human affairs, she would have thought the time so employed as so many precious moments wasted from her homely pursuits.

Still, for one moment she was touched by Janet's manner, and the cold sneering contempt died away on her lips as she followed her into the house.

Janet needed all the fire of her true heart's love for Donald to keep her spirits up under the daily and hourly persecution to which she was now subjected at home.

Mrs. Macpherson was one of those weak women who go smoothly and placidly along life's path as long as that well-trodden track is smooth and even; but once having stumbled over a difficulty or inequality, she never recovered her wonted balance afterwards.

She had been proud of Janet's beauty.

She had loved her eldest daughter with a love more akin to the hallowed sacred feeling she cherished for her dead boys, than that which she bestowed on her younger daughters. When she had seen how much Janet's quiet grace had attracted the notice of the laird, she had been inwardly triumphant, and a sort of glowing delight had brightened up her somewhat grey existence.

That Sir Archibald Morton, the handsome and courted young laird, should admire her daughter was a source of ill-concealed satisfaction to her, and, consequently, the reaction was all the greater when she came to the knowledge and belief that the infatuated girl had actually dared to refuse him.

Added to this the fact that her husband's illness was in the main attributable to the same cause, and it will be obvious to

the most unlearned reader that Mrs. Macpherson considered herself now a woman with a grievance.

Things did not even mend, as Janet fondly and foolishly hoped they would, when the farmer recovered from his torpor and regained his "mouth speech."

Surely no fairy wand had ever been waved over his head in the days of his most golden youth, by virtue of which pearls and diamonds dropped from his mouth whenever his lips unclosed.

No; it seemed rather as if the forced silence had merely had the effect of temporarily repressing the foul toads and snakes that dropped fast and furiously from his mouth, when he was sufficiently recovered from his illness to speak!

Many and many a time did even the strong-minded and stolid Susan hide her eyes and shrink into the darkest corner

for very shame at the cruel, wicked things he said during the days of his illness, something seemed to have come over him, and he was more than usually positive and determined. As for Janet, she kept out of his sight as much as possible, and hid herself in the sacred recesses of her dairy, among the pans of cream, and the dainty rolls of golden butter.

She could bear her life in the early morning hours, when the bright sunbeams glinted back again from the cups and glasses, the bees hummed merrily round their hives, and the little yellow downy chickens came to be fed. She could throw herself into these things and enjoy them, feeling strongly all the time the common chord of her love and Donald's making the foundation and basis of the marvellous fabric of harmony which she was living. But

in the evenings it was different, when the sun had died out, when the bees had gone to rest, and when the chickens were safely gathered under their mothers' wings. Then, in those still evening hours when the darkness was setting in, with the departure of bright day, yet gloomier thoughts, which had kept themselves in reserve, began to rush in on her and to overwhelm her.

The music which had been a jubilant strain in the fair morning hours became a sad minor requiem at night.

And Andrew railed on, and his temper grew worse, and his words more bitter, and still the earth opened not, and the skies withheld their vengeance.

CHAPTER VI.

“This world is not for age; nor ’tis not strange,
That even our loves should with our fortunes change,
For ’tis a question left us yet to prove,
Whether love lead fortune or else fortune love.”

SHAKSPEARE.

GRACE was inwardly much relieved when the breaking up of the large party brought the reality of the move to Glen-Auchmuty vividly before her eyes. She loved Lashiels, and would have been very happy there, had it not been for her brother’s unfortunate love affair.

She was fretted and uneasy also on the subject of Petronel.

Outwardly all went well in that quarter; Mr. Poyns was certainly a most devoted lover, and Petronel's future life was of her own choosing.

Lady Morton imagined that the beautiful betrothed was perfectly happy, and, though she privately wondered a little at her choice, still she completely acquiesced in it.

Grace, however, felt more and more persuaded, in her own mind, that Petronel was not happy.

Her gay chatter and frequent laugh were to be heard as usual; but there was a restlessness in the eye, a metallic harshness in the tone of her voice, that jarred on Grace's sensitive ears. Not only that, but she now first began to notice on Petronel's lips, when in company, a certain fixed smile which she had never seen there before. Now Grace was a

sufficiently advanced pupil of Lavater's, to know that a fixed smile is almost sure to portend some harmful quality. Sometimes it is ill-temper, sometimes perfidiousness.

She had read somewhere that when the human face has something to lock up, a fixed smile is its strongest and worst padlock.

It is not used for hoarding sorrow, or love, or holy thoughts, the key which unlocks treasures of this sort leaves a different impress on the lips; but a cold, hard smile is like the calm water above a malström, which only tries to conceal the raging tempest beneath.

Petronel's private thoughts were always difficult to get at; but Grace guessed a little at the unrest of her heart, and grieved over it accordingly.

Petronel would not confess—even to

herself—her disappointment at the coolness of Major Armstrong's manner to her. It vexed her a great deal, though she tried to fancy herself indifferent to it.

It was the force of contradiction which made her care for his notice. She was so accustomed to the flattery and adulation of the beings she constantly met in the world, that the distant, courteous civility of Major Armstrong was gall and wormwood to her.

If he had fallen in love with her from the first, if he had been constant in his devotion to her, she would in all probability never have given him a thought; but, during his visit at Lashiels, his studied avoidance of a *tête-à-tête* with her, his inflexible and unchangeable politeness to her, to her mother, to the Miss Anstruthers, to everyone in short, was very tiresome.

I use the word tiresome advisedly, for it is just the expression which suits the frame of mind in which the spoilt beauty found herself. She was cross, in fact, pettish and peevish, whenever she was not called upon to act a part in public, and then the cold fixed smile was ever visible, making Grace grieve as she noted it !

Grace was sorry to leave Lashiels, or she would have been sorry to do so under other circumstances.

She had grown strangely fond of the quaint old place, and loved the scenery among which it stood. Though the house had been modernized into all sorts of comfort and elegance, the old-fashioned style was still preserved. The low rooms were wainscoted, the ceilings were crossed by heavy massive rafters, at the joists of which were shields emblazoned with

the arms of the various noble families with whom the house of Morton was connected.

The garden had been wisely left in its primitive old-fashionedness, and Grace delighted in the queer nooks with which it abounded, shut in by all sorts of quaint little hedges.

The yew-tree terrace has been mentioned before, and rightly, as it was a very distinctive feature of the place.

Up and down this favourite walk Archie and Grace paced the evening before the departure of the family for the Highlands.

“Grace, do you remember the first evening we came here, how I came out by myself and walked up and down this path, ‘smoking my cigar?’” said Archie.

“Yes, I remember it very well, dear;” said Grace, “why do you ask?”

“Do you remember my telling you I had seen a ghost,” said he.

“Yes, of course I do!” said Grace, “but there are no ghosts about this evening, unless they are the ghosts of past fancies, which the pure day-light of duty will exorcise.”

“But there are some ghosts, Grace, which haunt us all the more when we try to banish them,” said Archie mournfully, as his eyes followed the blue cloud of smoke rising amidst the elm trees, and proceeding as he well knew from the chimneys of the farmhouse.

“We will go away, Archie, and put distance, and the grouse, and the heather mountains between you and the phantoms, and by-and-by

you will assure me that they have fled away, and that they will trouble you no more," said Grace.

"You think I am a child, Grace, and that change of scene can take away the memory of my deep and true sorrow," said Archie.

"No, dear! I do not think you are a child; it is just because I know you to be a man, and an honourable one, that I am sure you will try to give up thinking of one who belongs to some one else," said Grace.

"But how do you know that she *does* belong to some one else, Grace," said Archie, "you speak as if you were certain of it."

"And so I am certain of it," said Grace, gently, but firmly.

"How can you be certain when I only suspect that such may be the

case, Grace? you talk like a woman, and try to build up a whole substantial fabric out of one small stone," said Archie testily.

Grace paused a moment to consider, then feeling it would be safer for Archie to know all, she related to him her conversation with Major Armstrong, and the great interest he took in his quondam soldier-servant, Donald Inverarity, the under-keeper.

Archie was silent for a few moments; the idea that his own servant was preferred before him, that a menial in his employ was his successful rival, and was doubtless gloating over the fact in private, was very galling to him. Two or three turns up and down the terrace did the brother and sister take in silence; the shadows of the yew trees grew longer as they walked;

and Grace was afraid to break the silence, afraid to imagine what effect her words might have had upon her brother.

At last Archie turned sharply round and faced his sister.

"Grace," he said, "I was a fool not to have suspected it; the two figures which I saw that night, when I told you I had seen ghosts, were Janet and this young fellow! Why was I so blind as not to have known this before? I suppose that even then they were engaged!"

"Yes, I believe it is quite an old affair; they were play-fellows as children, you know, and all that sort of thing," said Grace.

Archie was strangely silent again for some minutes. With his arm round his little sister, he stood watching the

sunset glow die away from the hill-tops.

So had died away his hopes, so had passed his bright wishes. He knew now that it was all over, and that she never, never could be his. With a lump in his throat as if he was trying to swallow something, he stooped to kiss the pale sympathising face turned up to him, and as he did so, he caught his sister's gentle whisper, "At evening time there shall be light."

Yes, light there was, even in the midst of that deep dark cloud-shadow, the light of true holy love which is able to renounce self.

In that silent quarter of an hour, Archie had gained a victory over self greater than many a one of which the world boasts. Archie was a man of

honour and a gentleman, and he resolved inwardly that he would for the future try to regard Janet solely in the light of Donald Inverarity's betrothed wife.

With a prolonged sigh, which went through Grace's compassionate heart, he turned resolutely towards the house.

"Come, Brownie," he said, with an affectation of cheerfulness, which did not, however, deceive her, "we had better go in, or Poyns will begin to notice how often Pet has taken to yawning lately."

They entered accordingly, and found the happy couple intent on a game of *bésique*, while Lady Morton slumbered peacefully in her arm-chair.

She opened her eyes, however, as they entered the room, and made an effort to appear very wide awake indeed.

Archie strolled up to her, and laying his hand on her shoulder affectionately said, in a voice so like his old frank boyish one, that Grace started at hearing it.

“Little mother, shall we have a game of picquet? Now that our guests have gone we must amuse each other!”

Lady Morton was all alive instantly, and as her handsome son drew the table to her side and began to arrange the cards, Grace thought she had never seen a sweeter picture than they made together.

She took up a number of the *Saturday Review* and seated herself on a low chair to enjoy it.

But her thoughts wandered strangely, and the words which she read conveyed little or no meaning to her mind.

“I am so thankful it is over! so thank-

ful that he took it so well," she kept saying to herself; and her heart was so full of soft and tender thoughts, that she was not in the vein to appreciate the caustic satire in the article she was perusing.

CHAPTER VII.

“Sweet is the infant’s waking smile,
And sweet the old man’s rest,
But middle age by no fond wile,
No soothing charm, is blest.”

“**M**AN was not formed to live alone,”
and Donald, now that Andrew Macpherson’s spite against him was so violent and so proclaimed, not daring to go near the farm, was forced in self-defence to take some one into his confidence.

He was wonderfully happy about his love affairs, considering the fact that he

was, as it were, under a ban, and forbidden to go near Janet.

He was of a sanguine disposition, and having been cured of his one fit of mad and bitter jealousy by Major Armstrong's remonstrances, as well as by the sweet assurances Janet's own lips had given him of her constancy, he resolved never to doubt her again.

"Things will right themselves some day, dear," he would say, when he chanced to meet Janet on those rare occasions which were so very precious to them both. "Things will right themselves, I feel convinced, and in the meantime we must keep up our hearts and trust each other."

But the chance words between them were few and far between, and Donald was of a gregarious nature, and liked company, so he found himself very often

at the village smithy, in conversation with his old friend Steenie Robertson, the brawny, strong-armed smith and wheelwright of the village.

Steenie was a patient, canny Scotchman, working hard enough for his daily bread, and for the bread of those he fondly loved; for Steenie was burdened with a crippled wife and an aged mother.

Burdened did I say? Well! so said the villagers, but Steenie himself would never have used the word.

In him, spite of his cold, hard, imperturbable exterior, there lay hidden a heart tender as any woman's, and as generous as it was tender. As he raised his arm mechanically, and gave great swinging blows on his anvil, with as easy a motion as if he was merely playing a game, he knew well that, in proportion as he worked well or ill, the comfort of

those helpless beings wholly dependent on him would be increased or diminished.

Steenie was a clever workman, and had generally as much on his hands as he could manage to get through, but he was not a rich man, because every penny that by his hard work he was able to earn, was needed for comforts and remedies for that poor sick wife of his, who lay at home in her bed of suffering, but who whatever her pain might be, never failed to greet the great brawny, muscular giant on his return from the smithy, with a sweet smile and gentle, loving word.

Truly it was a pretty and touching sight to see the love and perfect confidence which existed between this pair.

Donald was never tired of talking

with Steenie, and many a time would he go to the smithy to consult with him about the repair of a gun-barrel, or the replacing of springs to the rat-traps, or other matters connected with his daily work, and of which Steenie was a good judge.

“So the laird is gone, Donald, and the big house is to be empty till the time arrives for the pheasant shooting I suppose,” said Steenie, the day after the departure of the Lashiels party for Glen-Auchmuty.

“Aye, aye, they are gone sure enough,” said Donald.

“Is there any likes of the laird getting married think you?” said Steenie, swinging a huge sledge hammer round as he spoke, and bringing it down upon the metal with a clang that echoed through the forge,

and which sent a perfect blaze of sparks flying through the gloom.

“Married!” said Donald, “how am I to ken if he is or no?”

“Well, may-be I thought you might have have heard talk of it up at the house yonder,” said the blacksmith. “But he is young yet and may be his fancy has not settled; there was a talk in the village, my poor Janie tells me, that he was after Macpherson’s lassie down at the farm, but folks will have their crack on ither bodies’ doings, and I pay no heed to such like idle havering.”

And Steenie went on with his work with such real and unfeigned interest that Donald saw that the rumour which he had mentioned had not affected him much.

“It’s no the fact that the laird

is going to marry the lassie, and as ye're an old friend, Steenie, and a trusty one, I'll no be behind-hand in confessing to you that I'm hoping to marry her mysel'."

"Eh, Donald, man! but I'm right glad to hear it," said Steenie, wiping his huge hand on his leathern apron, and then extending it to grasp that of his friend like a vice. "Eh! but she's a bonny lassie, and ye'll make a fine couple, the two of ye!"

"She *is* a good girl, Steenie," said Donald. "There is not one fit to match her on this side of heaven; she's a deal too good for me, and that's the truth, and the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"Aye, but they mostly are, the good ones I mean, the good women of this earth are a sight better than us miser-

able sinners, and there's a many of em too, thank the Lord for it!" and Steenie pulled the shaggy red lock that grew low down over his forehead, in token of his respect and appreciation of the fair sex.

There was a chivalry and devotion about this smutty giant that might have fitted him for a place at the Round Table, with Sir Bors, Sir Tristan, or any other of that famous coterie.

"But Steenie, my man," said Donald, "the old man won't have anything to say to me, so we must just bide our time, as I say to Janet."

"Won't have anything to say to you!" repeated Steenie, in measured accents of surprise; for in his eyes, the village hero was a man any father might be proud to see married to his daughter.

“He has taken the most violent dislike to me, Steenie,” said Donald.

“Eh ! but he must be clean demented !” said Steenie conclusively. “I have heard that he is gone daft-like in the head since his fit.”

“But this was before the fit ; it was some weeks since,” said Donald. “It was the night that I came home ; I went to the farm and he ordered me off, and spoke words against my father that he had no right to speak.”

“Against your father ?” said Steenie, who had a habit of always repeating a few words from a sentence, and putting them interrogatively. “Against your father ? why they used to be sworn friends when I was a little chap !”

“He does not speak of him as a friend now, I can tell you !” said Donald.

Steenie scratched his head meditatively. "I am a slow-headed chap myself, Donald," he said, "and my memory ain't worth nothing to speak of, but my old mother, she is as sharp with her wits as she ever was, and remembers all the bye-gones of the village as clear as the day. You come along home with me, my boy, and we will set her off talking about your father and Sandy Macpherson, and I make no doubt she will tell you something which will help to clear this up."

"Thank you, Steenie, I'll come with pleasure, for I am finely puzzled about this. The most I can find out is, that there was some row in the hills yonder about a still that was found out," said Donald.

"Oh! she talks by the hour about

the stills and the excise, and such like," said Steenie. "Come now; I'm just shutting up the forge, and so you had better come home with me at once before the auld wife gets sleepy."

Nothing loth, Donald followed his friend through a small paved court at the back of his work-shop, and into a low one-storied house, at the door of which an old woman was sitting knitting a stocking, and crooning to herself an old-fashioned ditty.

The sun was low in the heavens, and shot its almost horizontal rays upon her figure, showing out the extreme whiteness of her clean cap, the closely plaited frills of which bordered a face that had once been handsome.

She was Steenie's mother, and one of the oldest inhabitants of the village. Her memory was failing with regard to

the affairs of the past week, or even day, but was clear enough on subjects connected with the old days in which she was a living member of the busy world.

That time was long past and gone, her work was over now, and her waiting had begun.

The toils of life were over, she had now only to bide her time till her rest should begin.

Her senses too were deadened to external things, and she seemed past caring for the various interests and concerns of the country folk around her.

But the deadening of the faculties commences from the outside and works inwardly, and the complete state of stagnation had not yet been arrived at. There was a soft clear spot in that moss-grown life, in which was still a current of vital air.

She had travelled a long way on "the road full of pain," but there had been bright gleams for her as well as for others, and still in the dim twilight of her life there lay folded up like a rose-leaf the memory of the "touch of the vanished hand and the charm of the voice that was still." Still, as the evening shadows drew on towards night, as she found herself nearer day by day to that sleep the awakening from which is the dawn of endless day, the old woman would smile to herself as she felt that soon she would be again united to her husband, whose loss, as the companion and the guide of her youth, she had never ceased to mourn.

To all outward appearance she was a poor feckless old body, with one foot in the grave, and the neighbours looked upon her as a daft harmless creature; but only

Steenie, the big, brawny, and apparently immovable blacksmith, knew the sudden flickerings and gleamings of reason that flashed out in that poor worn-out brain. Flashes and gleams like those short spasmodic hints which the Winter sun gives of his existence in cloudy weather, almost startling one by their suddenness and their brilliancy. Truly our life seems to glide on in circles, and the line of beauty is ever a curve, which shows no sudden turns, no abrupt transitions.

Old age and infancy, infancy and old age, are the dominant notes in the never-ceasing melody of life's *Æolian* harp. Middle age comes between and fills up the chords of harmony, but the diapason of sound vibrates between the two extreme notes, and the one dies into the other.

Donald was not a poet, and probably would not have cared to be one, but there

was a sort of allegory in Steenie's household that touched him, he knew not why.

CHAPTER VIII.

“Or is it that when human souls
A journey long have had,
And are returned into themselves,
They cannot but be sad?”

WORDSWORTH.

IF Donald's heart was moved at the kind, protecting manner which Steenie showed to the old woman as she sat with her knitting in the court, he was still more touched at the sight which met his eyes within the cottage.

“Eh! Janie, woman! I've brought a friend to have a crack with you,” said Steenie, in a cheery voice, which seemed

to bring a waft of life and power to the poor, pale body whose weary hours were spent on a bed of pain.

Hour after hour Janie Robertson lay in her quiet corner, suffering and enduring, but always with a calm patience that was irresistibly touching.

The moment her husband's big shadow came between her and the light from the open door, she brightened up wonderfully, and held out her thin, wasted hand with a movement of perfect trusting love and confidence that gave Donald the sensation of choking which sudden emotion so often produces.

She was a young woman still, but in her short life she had endured what, measured by the standard of a healthy man's pains and aches, might well be called an eternity of suffering.

Steenie, good Christian as he was, was sometimes inclined to puzzle over the inscrutable decrees of Providence, and to wonder, in his honest, blundering way, why a being so pure and gentle, so good and patient should be called upon to bear so much.

“Pain canna’ be a punishment for sin, as some ministers tell us,” he would say to himself, in a puzzled manner; “it canna’ be that, or my limbs would suffer more than hers. I canna’ make it out; but anyway her crown in heaven will be the brighter for what she has to bear on earth.”

And then, trying hard to put away such thoughts, and to check that inclination to search after cause in order to account for effect, to which the Scotch mind is so especially prone, he would busy himself about household matters

and try his very best to soothe and cheer that gentle being whose sufferings it pained him so to contemplate.

“Donald Inverarity will sup with us to-night, Janie, darling,” he said, brightly, and immediately set to work to make preparations for the meal.

Donald offered to help him, but Steenie laughed, and said :

“No, no ! my man ; they say that too many cooks will spoil the broth, so I will not let you meddle in the matter ; I’ll just gang out and fetch in the mother, and she will tell you what you want to know.”

So saying, the gentle giant having shaken up his wife’s pillows, and given her a great, sounding, smacking kiss out of the depths and fulness of that true heart of his, went outside, and was heard coaxing and wheedling the

old woman into putting up her knitting and coming in.

Poor old Steenie ! everybody loved him, and Donald's heart began to warm towards the pale, fragile Janie, as he saw how fond she was of that big, honest husband of hers.

He is, after all, perhaps the most loveable and respectable of our *dramatis personæ*. There was nothing to conceal in the record of his life. All was true, honest, and above-board. You might have turned it over page by page, had it been written, and while much in it might have been found to interest there would have been little to correct, and nothing at all to blot out.

He was not a hero, in the common acceptation of the word, and yet I question if many of the laurel-crowned warriors, to whom the world erects

statues, had done half so much good as had this true, simple-minded man, honest Steenie Robertson, the village blacksmith.

Who can fathom the depths of such a heart as his? and yet those depths seemed clear and translucent enough, too!

Poor, plain labouring man that he was, with hands as hard and as brown as his own leathern apron, he had a heart as tender and as guileless as that of a little child.

Donald smiled as he watched him with the old woman at his side, and saw how carefully he was helping her to the house, and then he turned with a sigh and looked at Janie, whose breathing, he now noticed, was short, rapid, and irregular.

Her face was almost colourless, ex-

cept one bright red spot just behind each cheek-bone; the eyes were sunken, and surrounded by deep purple rings; the nose was pinched, and the mouth contracted, as with constant pain. But it was a sweet face, and Donald could well imagine the truth of the story he had heard of her having been once a very pretty girl.

Seen in repose, her face bore too evidently the traces of suffering to be a pleasing object; but when the light came to her eyes, the flush to her cheek and the quiver to her lip, as it did when any special tenderness of her husband's was manifested, then her countenance was illumined, her whole expression became animated, and it seemed as if for the moment she forgot her never-ceasing, terrible pain. To Donald, who had never known what it

was to have an illness, it was a matter of extreme wonder that any being who suffered as much as Janie Robertson did, should care to live.

“Life would not be worth having on such terms,” he said to himself, as he looked with wondering pity at her.

Steenie brought the old woman in, and settled her comfortably in the ingle-nook before he proceeded with his preparations for supper.

“There, mother, you’ll be all right now,” he said, as he deposited her in her favourite corner by the fire, and drew a large screen round her so as to keep off the draught.

“Ay, ay, I’ll be right enough now,” said the old woman, “I’ll be right enough till the Lord sees fit to take me to Himself. He has left me over long cumbering the ground.”

“No, mother, you must not say that!” said Steenie, cheerfully, “you ken quite well that the longer ye bide with us, the liefer we’ll be; but I want you to tell this young man about things which went on in this village in the days long ago—the days I mean when you were a young woman.”

“Eh! but those days are long past, and nothing is left of what was once so blythe and happy,” said the old woman.

“Tell us about it, mother,” said Janie, “tell this young man, Donald Inverarity, the laird’s under-keeper, what fine doings there used to be in the days of Auld Lang Syne.”

“Eh! but we were very different then,” said the old woman, “we were young, and blythe and bonny, and we could foot it on the grass with the best

of them ; but now we are all old and feeble, and the light is going from our een, and the hearing from our ears."

"Did you ever have any trouble about the excise and the stills?" put in Donald, as a reminder.

She turned round in her chair at these words, a bright gleam of intelligence shining out on her countenance.

"Why do you come here to taunt me wi' that?" she said fiercely. "It is all past and gone now—all past and gone, and we are getting too old for such-like work." As she said these words her unwonted energy died out, and she smiled placidly at the fire, while she stretched out her thin bird-like claws to warm at the glowing embers.

"Let her be," said Steenie, "she's no in the mood for telling us what we

want to hear. Maybe her tongue will be unloosed when she has had her supper."

Donald went and sat by Janie, and soon her nervousness at seeing a stranger passed away, and she talked frankly and fully to him.

The topic on which she was never tired of enlarging, was the praise of her husband.

"He is I am sure the best, the most considerate, the most affectionate husband that ever was born," she said, in low tremulous tones; she was very weak and her voice was at all times low and feeble, but when she was excited, it came in little wavering accents that seemed to spring from a true loving heart.

Donald was interested in her soon, for her own sake, as well as from pity for

her misfortunes. There is some sort of mute appeal to the sympathies of a generous man in the sight of a suffering delicate woman, and Donald was not a being who would refuse to attend to such a demand.

He was soon as friendly and affectionate with the whole family as if he had been in the habit of taking supper with them every night of his life, instead of being there for the first time.

He over-ruled Steenie's objections about the plurality of cooks being apt to spoil the broth, and brought his Crimean experiences to bear on the matter in hand with such effect that the supper, when ready, was pronounced most appetizing and excellent.

The old lady who had been smiling sweetly and placidly as she gazed on the

culinary preparations from her corner, woke up when her plate was put before her by Steenie and began to talk.

First she favoured the company with an elaborate description of her own wedding, and of the festivities which were held in honour of it. Then she set upon Donald, who she took into her head was an old admirer of hers, and scolded him for not remembering the excellence of the oat-cakes on that occasion.

“Did you have any whisky then, mother?” said Steenie.

“Ay, my boy! that we did,” said she, “and fine stuff it was before the excise took to meddling in the matter.”

“Did the excise meddle much?” said Donald.

“Afterwards they did, when they found a still in the hills up yonder, but

that was some years after I was married," said she.

"Where was the still?" asked Steenie.

"Up the Dower Crag, to the left of the loch," said the old woman; "at least that was the one there was the fight about with Macpherson's people," said she.

"What had Macpherson to do with it? surely the farmer had other fish to fry and had no need to be meddling with such things!" said Steenie.

"Macpherson was not known to have anything to do with it, till the time came when the excise got scent of it, and then it came out that he and his young son, though they always passed as god-fearing bodies, and gave themselves out as being of the number of the elect, had been driving a pretty smart trade with the smugglers, and that this still,

though it was called Donaldson's, really belonged mostly to them."

"And did they have any fighting when the excise officers got word of this?" said Donald.

"Ay! that they did," said the old woman, "there were sair banes amangst them I promise ye. There was young Inverarity who was in the excise, a brave chiel he was I can tell ye; and he laid about him and fought manfully for the king's rights."

"Were there any lives lost in these riots?" asked Donald tremblingly. So much depended on the poor old woman's answer, that he could not bring himself to speak calmly and deliberately.

"They said a lad was killed, and that Inverarity had something to say to it, but I never got rightly to the true

version of the story," said the old woman. "He was a low worthless fellow any way, and it seemed that he was employed by Macpherson in many dirty jobs that would not bear the light o' day; but I canna just say whether or no there was any truth in the matter."

"What was his name?" said Steenie.

"Weel, he was just Pat Donaldson, son of the old Donaldson who owned the still. Whether he was killed or no was never quite certain; the Macphersons, father and son, gave out that he was, and made out that it was Inverarity who fired the shot that killed him; but ither folks say that he was not killed, but that they got him out of the way to a foreign land, for fear of what he might have it in his power to tell."

"I would give something to know if he

is alive, mother," said Steenie, gazing with his honest eyes at his mother's thin parchment face.

There was something in his look which recalled the present into the poor woman's clouded mind, and as the present came back to her, the past receded into mist and darkness, and no more information could Donald Inverarity extract from her.

"Eh! but I'm a puir feckless auld wife," said she, relapsing into Scotch and imbecility at the same moment. "Eh! but I'm a puir feckless bodie, that has been ower lang out of my grave."

It was getting late too, and Donald, as he saw the stolid, weary look creeping over her face, felt that no more information was to be gained from her that evening, and so took his departure.

He had gained some insight into this

ugly, pent-up business, but he was quite certain that there was something still hidden, and the more he thought about it, the more he felt convinced that the disappearance of Pat Donaldson had something to do with the secret animosity which Andrew Macpherson evidently cherished against his father. What the mystery was he knew not yet, but he was determined to find out.

He haunted Steenie's home, and took the old woman unawares in her bright moments, whenever he had a chance, and by degrees elicited a good many facts which were useful in filling up blank spaces in the story, but the great fact of Pat Donaldson's disappearance was still unaccounted for.

CHAPTER IX.

“Yet are there tears in Heaven. Love ever breathes
Compassion, and compassion without tears
Would lack its truest utterance ; saints weep,
And angels, only there is no bitterness
Troubles the crystal spring.”

OWEN MEREDITH.

DONALD INVERARITY, in the fulness of his youth and manhood, and in the unconscious exuberance of perfect health, had a most profound pity for poor Janie Robertson. To one so weak, so frail, so suffering, would it not be a happy thing to die? Could she even herself wish to live, when

life with her only meant pain and weariness ?

In the excess of his pity and sympathy he caught himself fairly wishing her out of the world.

But it was a mistake in his reasoning that led him to this conclusion. He did not know, he could not possibly know, how much of real happiness may exist with suffering ; nay, how much may even arise through that very suffering which seems so hard to bear.

Pain is very near pleasure, and there is a curious sort of electric chain uniting the two extremes.

What do we know of the mystery which flows through our lives ?”

We look upon time, health, and strength as so many materials placed in our hands to be fashioned to a certain form according to our will or our pre-

judices, and turned to account or wasted according to our notions of expediency.

We forget that life itself is a mystery, that it springs from a divine fountain-head, that it is not made up of separate parts, but that it is one progressive whole.

Till we learn to *reverence* life as a holy thing, we shall do no real and lasting good with it.

Till we learn to look upon it as a means and not an end, we shall not value it aright.

In the intervals between her attacks of suffering, Janie Robertson enjoyed her freedom from pain so vividly and so glee-fully, that instead of being a negative it was a positive delight to her.

But Donald could not understand this; such a nature and such a life as hers was, could be to him but a mystery.

To him, the words "rest and be thankful" might have been inarticulate sounds. To his ideas, passive endurance was only another term for stagnation, and he pitied Janie Robertson most profoundly.

His life so far had been active and tolerably prosperous, he had never had to sit down with sorrow, to make the best of it, and finally to enjoy a temporary alleviation from it.

To have suffered any dire calamity or deep heart-blow often gives a steadiness and balance to the character, and leaves behind a permanent, consistent cheerfulness more touching, and, oh! how infinitely more blessed than the mirth of those who have never known grief.

Life is so equally balanced that there is generally as much to rejoice

as to weep over, if we are only able and willing to rejoice in, and for, and through others.

But some people are obstinate in their determination to turn their backs to the light. They prefer to indulge in their griefs, till they bring on a chronic dyspepsia of the soul, which is often combined with a corresponding disease of the body.

Mrs. Macpherson, Janet's mother, was one of those morbidly introspective beings who are the wet blankets of society. They live in an atmosphere of their own making, they are a species of moral cuttle-fish, and carry about with them a store of home-made sepia, which tinges everything through which they swim with its own dingy hue.

But with Janie Robertson it was

far otherwise. Hers was a healthy nature which had the power of throwing off trouble, and of not succumbing to it.

When Steenie was sometimes cast down at the bad times in which they were living, and at the difficulty there was in getting his bills paid, Janie would cheer and brighten him up again, and make him see that no amount of externally inflicted evil is to be compared with the evil which a man may inflict on himself by feebleness of purpose, or by a general uncertainty of action. Janie on her sick-bed was a bright central spot in that little household, a sun round which the whole domestic system revolved.

Donald always came away from the cottage the better for his conversa-

tion with Janie, and her interest in his affairs was so real and vivid, and her woman's heart so warm and sympathetic, that he was never afraid of telling her of Janet and of the true love that was not allowed to run smooth.

"Tell me all about her," she would say. "Ye ken that I have ower lang time to bide here and just think of my thoughts, and so I am grateful to ye for aught ye can tell me, forbye I like to hear of the bonny lassie ye are hoping to make your bride. And Donald, nothing loth, would pour into her ears whole volumes of praises of his well-beloved Janet, and the sick woman's eyes would brighten and her heart burn with wishes and prayers for his happiness."

"He is a good lad, Steenie, my

man," she would say to her husband when they discussed the matter, he kneeling by her side, while she with her little white fingers would stroke his big smudgy ones, or play with the tangled red locks of his rough hair. "He is a good lad, and I would like to see the lassie he speaks of so often, I think I could tell if she is worthy of him or no."

Janie's wishes were equivalent to laws in her husband's estimation, so honest Steenie began to cast about in his mind how a meeting could be brought about between the two.

Fortune favoured him before very long, however, as Janet Macpherson appeared one day at the smithy with a message from her father about some cart-wheels that wanted repairing.

He screwed up his courage and asked her to step in to see his sick wife, and she instantly complied in so sweet and willing a manner that Steenie's heart was touched immediately.

Janie was delighted with her new friend, and soon the chance acquaintanceship ripened into real esteem and affection.

Janet's visits were like sunbeams in the cottage, and Janie's sympathy and admiration for Donald soon won her heart.

And Janet would talk about Donald, how good he was, and how brave and how proud she would feel one day to be his wife, as she hoped and prayed she might be, though there were obstacles in the way at present. And Janie would listen and be in turn a confidante and a consoler, and then,

being exhausted her subject or rather, her breath, for the subject was inexhaustible, Janie would take up the parable and go on in her simple fashion singing the praises of her own gude-man.

Sometimes it was his careful nursing that was the theme of her song; sometimes it was his great skill as a workman, sometimes the records of his triumphs at the curling rink when the loch was frozen in winter time, and when Steenie who understood the noble game better than any other man in the neighbourhood, had won the great match of Lashiels against Inver Angus. Proudly she would show the prize curling stone made of Aberdeen granite highly polished, with a silver handle ornamented with a bow of ribbon, which was the chief treasure of this humble home.

"See this, child," said Janie, proudly doing the honours of the said stone to her guest, "ain't it a beauty? we are main proud of it."

And Janet allowed that it was a beauty, and that they might well be proud of it.

"Eh! but I am prouder of my man who won it," said Janie. "He came in that eve as calm and contented as if he had done nothing more than usual, and it was not till I cross-questioned him a bit, and speered into his doings that he tell'd me the great news, how he had been *skip* and how he had won the stone."

And so poor invalid Janie talked on, warming to her subject, and becoming almost eloquent at times, while an unconscious tinge of pathos made her words thrill in her listener's ears.

And Janet listened, nothing loth ; she was carried away by the true sentiment of the subject. All was so *real* to Janie Robertson. She had no sham nor possibility of deceitfulness in her composition. She had a most profound respect for Steenie in all things, and liked nothing better than to sing his praises. And the song was a pleasant one, and Janet listened to it as a true woman should listen to the story of a sister's life, and she listened and wearied not, which is more than can be said for many a listener in a more fashionable house than poor Janie Robertson lived in. Then the talk would turn on Donald, and Janie would pity Janet most sincerely for the obstacles that stood between her and her happy marriage.

“Can ye no try and coax your father,”

she would say, "can ye no smooth him down wi' soft answers as turn away wrath?"

"It is all of no use," sighed Janet, mournfully, "he is set against Donald, and ye might wile the wild singing birds off their bushes sooner than ye'd drive him where he does na' wish to go."

"Eh ! my puir Janet, my bonnie birdie," Janie would say, "but I'm main fashed for ye. Ill-will and malice and uncharitableness are sweet morsels for them as likes them, and they'll turn 'em over and over in their mouths, as if they was mighty petticklar dainties."

"I fear," said Janet, "that the morsel is like the manna which comes fresh and fresh day by day, and that he will never tire of it."

“Only it does not come from heaven!”
said Janie; and so the conversation
ended.

CHAPTER X.

“Pain is no evil
Unless it conquer us.”

CHARLES KINGSLEY.

IT is not my intention to take my readers to the Highlands, or to lead them step by step through the events of the next few months.

I will merely say that it was a glorious season, that the scenery was grand, and the grouse plentiful.

Archie, by dint of hard exercise at first, and by gradually growing strength of mind afterwards, became able to shake

off his troubles, and to look the world in the face again, and to take an interest in its events.

Not that he had forgotten Janet, or his deep love for her—no, he should never do that; but he had learned to recognise that the prize was not for him, and to submit to his disappointment as best he might.

And that very submission brought its own cure, so that by the time that the grouse were slain, and the chill autumnal air gave warning that it was wise to turn southwards, Archie was, to all outward appearance, as cheery and happy as ever.

Petronel's wedding was the next excitement, and a great excitement it was to all parties concerned, especially to Lady Morton.

Major Armstrong watched the whole

course of proceedings with much more interest than he would have thought it possible he could have felt.

They were in London now, as the wedding was to take place there, and the bride and bridegroom had arranged to spend the Winter in Rome.

Major Armstrong had returned from his yachting cruise, and was also in town, and consequently saw a great deal of the Morton family. His friendship with Grace increased daily, and he was becoming more and more aware of the fine points in Archie's character.

"Upon my word, he bore it well!" he would say to himself, thinking of Archie and his disappointment at being rejected, *vice* Donald accepted!

"Upon my word, he bore it well! The fellow has the makings of a true hero in him, if only he does not sink

down into nothingness, through the enervating influence of prosperity. Many a fine man is spoilt by being born with a silver spoon in his mouth."

Archie was the better in every respect for the burning, fiery trial through which he had to pass.

The crucible is a terrible ordeal through which to go, but it does its work in purging away the dross, and leaving the true metal pure and solid.

To borrow a simile from metallurgy, just as in forming the steel, the iron has its atoms driven apart by the heat, and then draws through its pores the carbon which advances it to the condition of steel, so the soul which has been tried and heated in the furnace of affliction takes in the fact that God doeth all things well, and realises His Hand in the minor events of what we call everyday

life, and armed with this knowledge, becomes "true as steel," keen and elastic.

Archie would never become a mere apathetic dawdler through life, or like many another, shield real idleness under the loudly-proclaimed principle of "*cui bono?*" He had too much energy for such a life as that, and fortunately for him his sister Grace was at hand to help him with her sympathy, and to encourage him with her approval.

"Lucky fellow to have such a good fairy ever beside him!" said Major Armstrong to himself, as he watched the brother and sister, and saw how Grace's eyes would kindle, and how her pale face would flush, and become almost pretty, as Archie would confide to her his schemes for the well-being of his tenantry, or the vague dream of a future

political career on which he sometimes loved to dwell.

Grace was every one's friend, every one's conscience, every one's adviser; but Archie was more to her than the whole of the rest of the world put together.

Petronel was a being of another sort, and though her brother and sister were fond and proud of her, still she lived in such a different world from theirs, that they had not much in common with her.

Petronel's wedding being an affair of great importance, was to be celebrated with due pomp and circumstance. The Delabole relations mustering in large numbers, it soon became evident that there would be present at the wedding the Joblillies, and the Garyulies, and the Picninnies, and the great Panjandrum

himself in the august person of Lord Delabole, a stately and pompous nobleman of the old school, with a flow of courtly conversation which contrasted funnily enough with the extreme shyness of his son.

Lord Delabole was delighted with Petronel. She was handsome enough to please the most fastidious taste, and she had the air of good society which he so thoroughly appreciated.

Lord Delabole was, what the younger generation would have called, a "swell of the first water."

Society recognized his superiority, which he himself took for granted pretty calmly. He was a patrician with high birth and a long pedigree, and he expected that plebeians should behave to him obsequiously. He was dull of comprehension and obstinate in will; but when

he once took a liking his very obstinacy made him stick to it.

Fortunately for Petronel, he had taken a liking to her, and he was prepared to make much of her as his son's wife.

Petronel was in her glory now. She had got over her temporary vexation at Major Armstrong's want of taste in leaving her so much to herself.

She was dazzled by the admiration of the multitude, and by the wonderful visions of her future splendour her lively imagination enabled her to conjure up.

She had never undervalued herself; but now the courteous old-fashioned politeness with which Lord Delabole treated her added several cubits to her stature.

Professors of copy-book morality tell

us that there is nothing new under the sun; but they cannot deny that there is another side to that question too.

Every emotion, every exciting thought, has to be realized afresh by each individual in turn, and the experience and observation of a thousand years, chronicled in as many books and duly perused, cannot add or diminish its intensity to the extent even of a jot.

Life has to be acted anew by every additional personage who appears on the stage, and though what Petronel was now doing was no startling novelty, but had been done hundreds of times before, yet to her it was as engrossing, as real, and as novel as if she were some new Eve freshly planted in Paradise, and freshly tempted by the glitter of the golden forbidden fruit.

The high-flown compliments and old-

fashioned politeness of her future father-in-law delighted Petronel.

She saw that a good deal of his admiration was real, and as she doubted not that it was well deserved, it never entered her mind that any part of it could be exaggeration.

His pretty speeches delighted her, and even made her tolerate in him what she would have stigmatized in anyone else as the horrible habit of snuff-taking.

But Lord Delabole had an airy way of tapping his *tabatière*, before indulging in what has been called "the nasal pastime," which amused Petronel extremely. The excitement of having to undergo the inspection of all her future relations, the pleasure of receiving the costly and beautiful wedding presents, and last, but not least, the important

business of the *trousseau*, occupied her mind completely, and left her no time for that listless feeling of weariness and *ennui* which had so often crept over her in the Highlands during her *tête-à-tête* walks and drives with her taciturn but adoring lover.

Now and then when she had found herself very hard up for something to say to him, the thought had crossed her mind that married life would be rather a trial to her patience if such a state of things were to continue; but when such an ugly thought appeared she would nip it in the bud, and peremptorily tell herself that such a state of things should not continue. She was not going to marry a man in the social position of John Poyns without doing her best to avail herself of that social position. She was not going to sink

down into the Darby and Joan life that to Mr. Poyns appeared the very acme of felicity.

No, no, indeed! she was a beauty, and she meant to shine and to be admired by the great world in which she was determined to become a queen.

And so, amidst bustle and excitement, vanity and vexation, the time passed only too rapidly, and the wedding day came upon her almost before she was aware.

Lady Morton, all tears, smiles, and tenderness, hovered over her darling as the expert lady's-maid put the finishing touches to the elegant bridal toilette, and arranged the orange-blossoms in the exquisite golden hair.

"My darling, you are quite sure you are happy?" whispered the mother, as

she stooped over her to kiss that beautiful face.

“ Quite, thank you, mamma ; take care, Price, you are running that hair-pin into my head,” was the answer, and the calm blue eyes gazed at their own reflection in the mirror as tranquilly as if she were dressing for a ball.

Her dress fitted beautifully, and she knew that it was in perfect taste, and of the latest fashion.

She left her room and descended to the drawing-room where Archie was waiting to escort her to the church.

She was looking her very best so the mirrors told her, and the admiring smile on her brother's face confirmed their verdict.

A glow of satisfaction passed over her features as she returned her brother's smile.

“By Jove, she does look happy!” said Archie, to himself, “she must love the fellow, after all, though I have had my doubts on the subject so often.” .

CHAPTER XI.

“Affection follows Fortune’s wheels,
And soon is shaken from her heels ;
For, following beauty or estate,
Her loving soon is turned to hate.”

SIR W. RALEIGH.

AS the carriages reached the rather un-ecclesiastical building of St. George’s, Hanover Square, they found another wedding party emerging from its portals.

Petronel’s bridesmaids (amongst whom was Lady Violet Ogilvie) formed into their ranks and prepared to follow her up the aisle, when they were stopped for a moment to let the other bride get into her carriage.

She was a sweet-looking girl, by no means so beautiful as Petronel, and a total stranger to her, but as the two veiled figures passed each other on the steps, Petronel glanced around her and curled her lip angrily, while her hand trembled on her brother's arm.

Archie felt the movement and attributed it to a nervousness natural enough under the circumstances; he would have been rather amazed had he been able to read his sister's real thoughts at that moment.

"It is too bad of Madame Elise," they ran, "she assured me my dress was unique, and now that chit of a girl, some mere nobody, has got herself up for her wedding exactly like me. I believe our dresses came from the same piece!"

With a flushed face and drooping head Petronel took her place beside her lover

at the altar, the holy words were spoken, and they were made man and wife.

The bridegroom, happy and earnest as he was, was still almost grotesque from his shyness, and it was almost by a miracle that he succeeded in putting the ring on that slender finger without dropping it on the ground.

But the Honourable and Reverend cousin who performed the ceremony was used to his ways, and got him through it somehow.

Grace felt the service deeply, and her thoughts were solemn, not to say sad, as she gazed on her beautiful sister, and pictured the new life on which she had embarked.

There was no turning back now, no shrinking. The time was passed for such like vacillation. Petronel was now the Honourable Mrs. Poyns, and the

beaming face of the bridegroom spoke volumes as to the fact that he was proud of his wife.

There was not much in the appearance of the church itself to add to the solemnity of the scene.

Search London if you will from east to west, and I believe you will hardly find a church less capable of raising the feelings of awe and reverence awakened in the mind by such a solemn service as the one in which our friends were at that moment engaged.

But Grace looked beyond the present moment; her mind dwelt on the future, and on what that future was likely to be to her sister.

At last the whole ceremony was over, the registers duly signed, and the wedding party had returned to the house. Then ensued the long and dreary hour of wait-

ing for the wedding-breakfast, when the guests scattered in little groups round the room, trying to swallow their yawns, and not to turn round too eagerly at every fresh opening of the door, in hopes of a summons to the breakfast table.

Lady Violet Ogilvie, quiet as ever, was becoming a little less shy than she had been at Lashiels.

She had a keen sense of humour and amused herself excessively with her observations on men and manners. The bridegroom especially attracted her attention, though seen by the side of his beautiful bride he was a very insignificant part of the show.

Bridegrooms are always in an anomalous position at their own weddings. They are necessary items of course. The wedding could not go on without them; but the whole fuss and excitement is a

sort of incense in honour of the bride, who is assuredly, on her wedding-day at least, the better half.

Lady Violet was a special favourite of Major Armstrong's who looked upon her as a child indeed, but as a child worth cultivating.

"A sweet Spring blossom, more to my taste than the flaring exotics of London," he said to himself, as he drew near her. She looked up with a shy smile as he took his seat by her side.

"Well," he said, "are you envying the bride, or pitying the bridegroom."

Lady Violet laughed, a little shy frightened laugh, but with such a look of intelligence on her face as to convince Major Armstrong that she was of his mind concerning Petronel.

"She is very beautiful," said she,

"but he looks so dreadfully frightened, it is quite amusing to watch him."

"Frightened does he?" said Major Armstrong, "no wonder, poor fellow, he is in for it now, and tied up for life."

"I don't think he minds that," said Violet; "of course he is very proud of his beautiful wife, but he looks so dreadfully ashamed of himself, it was that that made me laugh."

"He does look rather like a fish out of water," said Major Armstrong, as he turned his eyes in the direction which Violet's had already taken. There the victim stood, looking as Violet had said, heartily ashamed of himself, and as if he wished the earth to open under his feet and swallow him up.

The climax of his misery seemed to be reached whenever his ear caught the

the lively sallies with which Lord Delabole was entertaining the company. Certainly it was amusing to contrast the manners of this strangely different father and son. Lord Delabole's manner was courtly, and he uttered his finished compliments and his prepared impromptus with an air of condescension; while the son's painful hesitation and blushes excited mingled compassion and amusement.

"It is all that confounded snuff-box that does it," he muttered to himself, as he watched his father's airy manner and perfect ease. "How can a fellow be at his ease with nothing in his hands."

As this idea seized him, he turned to one of the tables on which the bride's costly gifts were displayed, and took up a small jewel-case.

It opened, and in a soft nest of white satin sparkled a splendid sapphire and diamond ring.

At that moment a stir in the crowd indicated that an end was likely to be put to their suspense by the announcement of breakfast, a jerk was given to his arm by some one passing hastily by him, and in his confusion his grasp relaxed and the ring fell from its case and rolled away beneath the feet of the crowd.

What was to be done now? He was called upon to take his bride downstairs, and he must go at once. It would never do to leave her standing while he groped about on the floor for the missing treasure!

He determined therefore to say nothing about it, but to seize an opportunity afterwards while his bride was dressing for her journey to hunt for it.

Archie was seated next to Lady Violet at the breakfast, having on his other hand a very deaf and very enormous dowager of the house of Delabole.

Finding that his attentions in that quarter were limited to the proper administration of food and champagne, he had leisure to observe his other neighbour.

She was looking very elegant and very sweet in her bridesmaid's dress, and Archie, if it had not been for his love for Janet, if there had existed a corner of his heart yet uninvaded by her power, must have felt the influence of this fresh and artless girl's retiring grace and sweet undefined humility.

But Archie still loved Janet, though he had begun to realise that he must set himself to conquer that love—and

so Violet was only to him a nice gentle girl, a friend of his sister Grace, and less of a bore than anyone else of his acquaintance. Oh! the dreariness of that banquet, which Lord Delabole's most courtly graces failed to enliven!

It lasted longer than usual too, and the haunting knowledge of the lost ring kept the bridegroom in a smothered agony.

At last came the welcome signal for a move, and when the bride had swept upstairs, attended by her mother and sister, to prepare for her journey, John Poyns made a dash for the drawing-room door, and got in before the elegant mob had ascended the stairs. Down on his knees he went instantly in search of the lost treasure, without glancing at the table whence he had taken it. If

he could but find it and put it back before anyone came up, no one would be the wiser!

Where could it be? In vain he searched the carpet for it, and he was in despair, as the sound of gay voices and light laughter reached his ears and told him that the company drew near!

The door was just opening when his eye was arrested by a sparkle behind an old Indian screen. The ring had evidently rolled away into the corner, swept probably by some trailing silk dress. He had just time to get behind the friendly screen, when three or four ladies entered the room.

Hardly had they done so when exclamations of horror and surprise fell on his ears.

“Good heavens! what has happened,

the jewels are all gone ! thieves ! robbers ! help !” such were the sounds which reached the luckless bridegroom’s ears, as he cowered behind the screen, uncertain how to make his escape, and grasping the glittering jewel in his hands.

Archie was the first person to hear the cries and to rush upstairs. He was greeted by a torrent of words and exclamations.

The wedding presents had been left upon the tables when the company went down to breakfast, and now the jewel cases remained indeed, but all empty !

“ Perhaps the maid has packed them up,” suggested Archie, in a cool matter-of-fact voice, that was very reassuring.

“ To be sure ! I wonder we never

thought of that!" said a lady, who had been most prominent in the alarm.

Mr. Poyns was beginning to think he might venture forth from his hiding place under cover of the clatter of female tongues which ensued, when Lady Morton entered the room.

"Dear mother," said Archie. "these ladies have been in alarm, fearing burglars have entered the house and carried off Pet's jewels, but I have comforted them by telling them that they are probably by this time safe in her dressing-case."

"Indeed they are not, my dear," said Lady Morton. "Pet left them in my charge till she comes back in a fortnight; but you don't mean to say they are gone!"

"Indeed they are then," said Archie, "and by Jove I can't understand it."

He rang the bell violently, and it was soon answered by a footman, who, however, could throw no light on the subject.

Great excitement now took the place of the languid politeness that had prevailed, and there was no fear now that the guests would be at a loss for a topic of conversation.

“Send for the police!” “Search the house!” “The robbers must be concealed!” were amongst the exclamations.

The butler was summoned to give his account of the proceedings amongst the servants, and his evidence went to prove that the thief or thieves must have entered the house while the breakfast was going on, knowing probably that the men-servants would be too busy in the drawing-room to guard the house.

Such a thing had never happened in *his* family before, and Mr. Mills was overwhelmed with distress at the notion of such a bare-faced robbery.

Meanwhile the bridegroom was becoming more and more uncomfortable every moment. What to do he knew not! He would have been thankful for a trap-door through which he could have made an abrupt descent to the regions below.

In his agitation he involuntarily pressed closer against the screen, which, unaccustomed to such hard usage, tottered, and would have fallen, had he not put out his hand to support it.

"Good gracious! there is a man behind the screen!" shrieked Mrs. Becket in her loudest and shrillest treble. "I declare there is one of the

gang concealed, and who knows how many more of them are in the house!"

Her worst fears were confirmed as her quick eye caught the sparkle of a jewel in the hand which had caused such a commotion.

Fortified by Champagne, and encouraged by the hopes that their heroic conduct would redound to their everlasting glory, three or four young men rushed to the spot, bent on capturing the robber or perishing in the attempt! They seized first the hand, then the arm and finally the whole person of the robber, and drew him triumphantly from his ambush into the light of day.

The deaf Dowager, whose intellect was as dull as her hearing, and who, like the boa-constrictor, was apt to

become torpid after her meals, now suddenly awoke to the sense of danger, and with great presence of mind, uttered a succession of short, sharp shrieks with the precision and regularity of minute guns. Her mental vision then taking a wider range, she changed her cry to fire! fire! her general behaviour meanwhile being of a wholly inconsequent and undignified description. At any other time her extraordinary vivacity would have brought her under general observation, but at that moment the astonishment of the company was all required for the strange sight before them.

Never had the Honourable John Poyns appeared in such a light before. Dragged from the obscurity of his hiding place into the full light of day, it was hardly to be expected that any bride-

groom could look dignified. But it was not merely loss of dignity, it was positive abject misery that was expressed by his looks.

His coat was awry, his neck-tie twisted, and his hair, during his rummage on the carpet, had contracted a certain dusty, fluffy appearance, which gave him a wild look, reminding one forcibly of a blasted heath.

For a moment there was absolute silence, the silence of utter astonishment and bewilderment, broken only by the minute guns fired by the Dowager. Then, simultaneously, the company, discovering its mistake, began to be at its ease again. A burst of laughter followed, and the rebound from fear to amusement was such a relief, that it was some minutes before Mrs. Becket

and her friends remembered that the real thieves were not yet caught.

“It was a lucky thing upon my word that you managed to drop that ring, Poyns,” said the Honourable and Reverend cousin, “otherwise that would have gone with the rest.”

Petronel's horror when she came down stairs dressed for her journey, and was met with the intelligence of the robbery, was great indeed. Her thoughts were so taken up with the subject, that she hardly responded to the tearful and tender adieux of her mother, and her last words to her brother, as he put her into the carriage, were repeated injunctions to him to leave no stone unturned to discover the thieves.

Mr. Poyns, having got rid of his fluff and some of his agitation, took his

seat beside his beautiful bride, and away they went on their wedding journey, leaving their well-bred and fashionable friends in a much more animated state of mind than is usual to the company after a long and tedious wedding festivity.

What was to be done about the robbers? was the first question, and Archie and Major Armstrong lost no time in communicating with the all-potent authorities of Scotland Yard on the subject.

No trace of a thief was to be found in the house. It was altogether a most uncomfortable and mysterious affair.

Mr. Mills was greatly disconcerted. "You see, Sir Archibald," he said to his master, "it is so much more discreditable to the family than an extensive

plate robbery would have been ! Such things, though much to be deplored, have occurred in the first families, but this you see is a sort of picking and stealing affair that is much more low !”

“Perhaps it is so, Mills,” said Archie, “but I am not ambitious of the honour of being the victim of a plate robbery, so mind you count the forks and spoons.”

CHAPTER XII.

“High manhood fused with female grace
 In such a sort, the child would twine
 A trustful hand unasked in thine,
 And find his comfort in thy face.”

TENNYSON.

PERHAPS the robbery was, after all, not such an unmitigated evil, though looked at from Mills' point of view it was not a feather in the cap of the family gentility.

To be sure Petronel's jewels were too beautiful and too valuable to be let go without regret, and without using every means in the attempt to recover them; but the loss of presents given for fashion's

sake is hardly likely to cause such regret as that of trifles in themselves of no intrinsic value, but loved for the sake of the donors and for the associations connected with them.

The new subject of excitement and speculation was good for all the party, and prevented Lady Morton from tearful recollections of her darling's departure.

"The house can never be the same again, Grace," she sighed. "Now Pet is married and gone, I am so afraid it will be dull for Archie; I do wish he would marry too, for he ought to have a bright cheerful home."

Grace said nothing; her eyes had been often following her brother's movements during the day, knowing what a crowd of conflicting feelings he must have had to conceal, and how trying the whole affair must have been to him.

During the next few days, however, her mind gradually became more at ease respecting him, as she watched his eagerness over the items of news daily brought him by the detectives, and saw with pleasure how much more easy it had become to him now to enter into other people's feelings than it had been a few months since.

Besides thief-hunting has a sort of excitement in it which suited his disposition, and after a long day's work in tracking down wretched villains to their lairs, he would come in, tired indeed, but without that look of suppressed pain which his face had too often worn of late, and which sorely grieved the heart of the sensitive and affectionate sister whose eye was so quick to mark every change in his countenance.

“'Pon my life I had no idea there were

so many wicked people in the world," he would say, when he came home tired and saddened by the sin and misery he had been hearing of.

"My dear fellow," said Major Armstrong, "my opinion of the world, on the contrary, is getting better and better every day; there was a time when I used to hug myself with grim satisfaction and tell myself in private that the world was a howling wilderness, and that virtue was extinct, a thing of the past—in fact to be spoken of by antiquarians in the same tone of respect as that in which they mention mammoths or other antediluvian specimens; but now I am beginning to change my mind again, and to find that while such home circles exist, as the one of which you, you lucky fellow, form a part, we need not go back to the dark ages to seek for goodness."

As he spoke he opened the drawing-room door, and shoved Archie before him into the presence of three ladies.

It certainly was a pleasant change from the cold damp streets, that well-lighted and well-furnished room. A fire gleamed brightly, and the lamp on a small table threw its light on a pretty tea-service. Lady Morton sat in an arm-chair with her soft white knitting in her hands and her cup beside her. Grace was pouring out the tea, and Lady Violet, who was the only one remaining of the wedding guests, sat on a low stool gazing earnestly into the glowing coals.

She turned quickly as the door opened and sprang up. The warmth of the fire and the sudden sense of shyness made her cheeks burn, and gave her face the bright look which it only wanted to make it quite beautiful.

Archie started as he looked at her. Never till that moment had he recognised the fact that, instead of being a sweet, shy little school-girl, she was a beautiful woman.

There was something to a man of Major Armstrong's temperament irresistibly touching in this glimpse of home-life. Only a few short months ago he had begun to pride himself on his stoicism, he had begun to tell himself that he had outlived his youth, and all his soft and tender feelings, and in fact his better self; but one "touch of nature makes the whole world kin," and certain good thoughts were struggling within his soul.

Two great causes generally turn loving natures into cold ones, and both of these causes had fallen to his lot. I mean money-troubles, and love-troubles. It had been a mixture of pique

and vexation which had led him to the conviction that all his happiness was gone for life.

Going home that evening to his solitary lodgings, he sat far into the night in his barrack-chair in front of the fire, musing, poking the coals, and taking a long look backward upon his past life through the embers.

There were dark caverns among the bright living warmth of those coals, dark still, though the forked merry flames were playing a game of hide and seek at their entrance, looking in and then running back as if they were afraid to venture into the gloomy recesses.

“It is so,” thought the would-be cynic, “one may yield to the warmth of the flickering flames, and imagine that the present makes up for the past, but it will not do, it is only a base illusion,

the dark cavern still remains as black, as horrible as ever." And he gave a vicious little tap with the poker, and so the cavern collapsed; and light, warmth, and merry brightness reigned in its stead.

"A proper lesson to me," he thought, "a proper rebuke for my grumpiness and discontent. Hack away at your secret cavern of disgust and dissatisfaction with the past, with the commonplace weapons of the present, that is the sermon in stones I ought to have learned at my ain fire-side."

It had been a pleasant evening and he looked back upon it with a glow at his heart.

It was always a pretty sight to see Archie's tenderness and gentle manner to his mother. I am afraid I have done my part very badly, if I have not shown my reader already that Archie was a

hero. Not a hero only in the common acceptation of that hackneyed word, a being rash and spasmodic in his best moments, and cool and impertinent when not roused. No ; Archie was not in the very least degree such a hero as that.

To be sure he had strong thews and sinews, and could use them when occasion served. He excelled in manly sports, and dearly loved his noble horses and dogs ; but in none of these particulars lay his chief strength.

Perhaps only Grace as yet knew what his better self was, and how noble and self-sacrificing he could be.

Major Armstrong was behind the scenes to some extent, and he allowed to himself that Archie's conduct about Janet had been noble and upright ; but he knew not the depths of tenderness that lurked in the manly heart of his friend, he

only envied him the pleasant social home-circle in which he lived, and wondered sometimes that he was not spoiled by the good fortune that had fallen to his share.

Archie's disappointed love had not turned to gall and bitterness, as it so often does in this world.

It seemed instead to have strengthened and braced him, and while it had opened his eyes to the realities of the troubles of life, it had at the same time given an impetus to his better feelings, and had roused him to exertion on behalf of the suffering, sad humanity around.

Grace was his confidante and counsellor, and while the pure warmth of generous feeling glowed at his heart, his eyes shone brightly, and his manner was recovering its wonted high-bred ease and cheeriness.

Lady Violet was much less shy in the select party in London than she had been at Lashiels in the Summer.

She looked up to Grace with that sort of clinging worship, so often rendered by a young girl to one of her own sex older and wiser than herself.

Lady Morton had completely won her heart by talking to her of her dead mother, and when Grace had begged her to take compassion on their loneliness, and to stay for some weeks with them, her delight was only tempered by her fear that she might be in Sir Archibald Morton's way.

"To be sure he is out a great deal," she thought, "and they know him so well and love him so much, that they would not ask me to stay if they were afraid of my boring him."

This was the only thought that came

between Lady Violet and utter felicity. When Archie was out of the way, she was quite at her ease with Lady Morton and Grace, and very soon showed them that beneath that fluttering shyness there was a great deal of fun and mischief, as well as of intelligence and thoughtfulness.

When with her aunt, Lady Katherine Anstruther, and with her cousins, Helen and Marion, Violet felt suffocated. The air of their house was so heavy, the conversation so dull, and so full of long words that might mean so much, but which often meant so little, that she was never perfectly at her ease.

And Violet's fault or failing most readily displayed was extreme pride or sensitiveness, which made her dislike the feeling of being a member of a household on sufferance.

No argument, neither reasoning nor ridicule, could shake her belief that everybody thought her an incubus.

Grace, who read most people's minds pretty easily, soon discovered this perverse trait in her little friend's character, and tried by every means in her power to reason her out of it.

Grace smiled to herself at the pertinacity of the idea which had taken possession of Violet's mind.

"I am glad I do not feel the same," thought she; "and I have more reason for the supposition, as no one can call me an ornament to society," and she glanced at her own colourless face in the glass, and contrasted it with the graceful loveliness of her friend.

She hinted as much to Violet one day, but the bare mention of such an idea sent such a vivid scarlet to her cheeks,

and such a distressed look to her soft brown eyes, that Grace never again made any allusion to her own deformity before her.

Neither Lady Morton nor Archie had the vaguest notion of what was passing in the mind of the delicate deformed member of the household.

I question whether they had either of them ever attempted to fathom her thoughts, but they both felt the charm of her presence amongst them, and the benefit of her never-failing tact and sweetness of temper.

Grace was, by reason of her deformity, a being apart in the world; she had very early in her life recognised the fact that she should never be able to take her place amongst other girls of her own age and station, and gradually and imperceptibly it was borne in upon her

that for her there never would or could be any thought of marriage or of love, in the common acceptation of the word.

The knowledge of this came upon her so gently and impalpably, that it did not hurt her. Growing up with this consciousness, and with a keen intellectual vigour, all the more remarkable from its contrast to her weak, delicate frame, she had learnt the great lesson of content, and of dependence on the world of thought for her amusement, while the world of human suffering around her led her to call forth her best sympathies in its aid.

Between her and Petronel, sorely against Grace's will, there was an indefinable gulf, an entire want of mutual sympathy, which grieved her sometimes even when she was too young to be much troubled by it.

Now, as from childhood, they had grown into womanhood, the gulf fixed between the two sisters was wider than ever.

Major Armstrong delighted in Grace. She was such a self-possessed, intrepid little being, not a bit afraid of speaking out her mind, and yet so modest and gentle withal.

The little party in Chesham Street was just what Major Armstrong enjoyed, and he was always welcome there.

"The Violet is unfolding rapidly, Miss Morton," he said to Grace, one day; "what are you doing to her?"

"I think it is only the sunshine of kindness," said Grace, "the poor little flower wants that."

"Yes, and I fancy there is a good deal of east wind in the Anstruther atmosphere," said Major Armstrong.

“Not altogether *east* wind,” said Grace, “for that would imply unkindness, and that I am sure there is not; but I think it is a good stiff northern breeze, uncompromising and hard.”

“Poor child! I am glad you have taken possession of her for a while; I cannot fancy either *Art* or *Science* (as Mrs. Becket calls them) being sympathetic companions.”

“No; that is just what they are not,” said Grace. “Poor little Violet never complains, but I can see she droops in the uncongenial atmosphere.”

“Humph! it is a pity she cannot be transplanted!” said Major Armstrong.

A bright glance from Grace's honest grey eyes followed this remark, and the conspirators understood one another from that moment.

CHAPTER XIII.

“Regret and faith alike enchain ;
There was a loss, there comes a gain,
We stand at fault betwixt the twain
And that is veiled for which we pant.”

JEAN INGELow.

DONALD in the meantime was getting dreadfully impatient.

He was a restless young man by nature, and was not at all inclined to submit quietly to the present state of affairs. But what was to be done ?

Old Macpherson obstinately refused to give his consent to his daughter's marriage, and Janet obstinately refused to marry without that consent.

Donald saw her often, but it was only on rare occasions that he could have any conversation with her.

It was trying to an ardent lover to be kept in this state of suspense, and he deserved some credit for his conduct under the circumstances. Steenie was driven to his wits' end to know in what manner he could best serve his friend, and many an hour did he puzzle his honest head and vex his tender heart over the subject. In his forge, as with clanging blows he brought his huge hammer to bear on the metal he was fashioning, he would turn the matter over and over again in his mind, but with small results.

"See the sparks how they hurry away from us," he mused. "He was a canny man that made the remark that 'man is born to trouble as the sparks fly

upward.' Eh! but that is true enough! Born to trouble we are indeed, and I would fain ease my ain burden by helping Donald to lighten his."

At this moment Donald entered the forge, looking pale and anxious.

"Donald, man! how is it wi' you?" said Steenie, brightly; for it was part of his principle always to try to cheer his friends.

"I am in a terrible taking, Steenie," replied Donald, "no man was ever worse served than I am by that selfish old hunk Andrew Macpherson. I declare it is enough to set one's blood boiling with rage, to think that an old villain like that should have it in his power to spoil the happiness of a far honestest man than he is; to say nothing of the poor girl who looks paler and more anxious every time I see her."

“Bide your time, man,” said Steenie, soothingly.

“Bide my time,” retorted Donald angrily; “and what is the good of biding my time and wearing out my patience and my youth for nought?”

“She is a bonny lassie,” said Steenie, reflectively, and more as if he was thinking his own thoughts aloud than replying to the remark of his friend. “She is a bonny lassie, and she is leal and true, and a gude wife is a gift from the Lord, as I ken weel enough, forbye my poor Janie is what she is?”

When Steenie spoke in this calm reflective way, his honest blue eyes gazing intently into the fire and his handsome face in repose, there was something grand about him which, irritated as Donald was, he could not choose but feel.

Donald had never been to Rome, and had never consequently seen the magnificent statue of Moses by Michel Angelo; but had he been familiar with it, I think the calm grandeur of Steenie's attitude would have reminded him of it. There is strength, tenderness, nobility, and reverence combined in that marble countenance, the grand conception of a great artist; but after all what artist ever conceived anything greater or nobler than man, made in the Divine image?

There was something in Steenie's face which shamed Donald in his restless childish petulance and impatience.

Donald had always had a sort of boyish admiration for the masculine virtues of the English character, truth and honour, but he had somehow been accustomed to look upon forbearance

and feeling as proofs of weakness. He had made that fatal but too common error, the separation between the manly and the feminine of character.

He could admire in Janet her gentle forbearance with her father's violent conduct, because he knew that to be gentle and forbearing was becoming in a woman; but, priding himself upon his strong manhood, he had come to consider that any forbearance on his part would be mere culpable weakness.

And when Steenie in his simple friendly manner counselled patience and submission for the present at all events, Donald was almost inclined to be vexed and to think him weak and half-hearted; but, glancing at his giant form and mighty muscles, his admiration for his friend's physical force told upon him,

and made him pay more heed to his words than he would have done, had they been uttered by one who was small and insignificant. No news could be gathered of the missing man, Pat Donaldson; a mystery hung over the whole business, and to involve matters more inextricably, the old woman took cold and became more and more imbecile and hopeless every day.

Janie, who was strongly interested in the whole affair, was also prostrated by one of her frequent attacks of severe rheumatic pain, so that she was for some time quite incapable of trying to help them by endeavouring to rouse her mother-in-law's dormant faculties.

Low-spirited and out of patience as Donald was from time to time, his mind was kept from brooding too much on his trials by the great, and ever in-

creasing interest which he took in his active out-of-door life ; and intimate companionship with animate and inanimate Nature braced and cheered him, and kept him from growing sour and desponding.

To poor Janet these days and weeks were infinitely more trying than they could be to him, for she had not the power of escaping from her worries. Whatever the bitterness of her father's mood, she was obliged to yield to it. Whatever cruel words he uttered, she was forced to bend her head meekly and hear them in silence.

Her mother too was variable in her temper, and apt to get fretful and dissatisfied with things in general and Janet in particular.

Ignoring the many years of trial which she had suffered from her husband's temper,

she chose to imagine that his irritability now was the effect of his illness, and of that illness she considered Janet the cause.

Mingled with this was her vexation at Janet's stupidity in losing such a "chance," as she persistently called the laird's offer; and she harped upon the subject perpetually, in that wearisome, nagging way which lone, lorn women, of the Mrs. Gummidge order, find so effective in annoying others. When months went by without the return of the laird, or any change in Janet's love for Donald, it chanced that again "there came a braw wooer across the burn-side," in the person of a well-to-do-farmer and cattle-drover, who, in his dealings with Andrew, had more than once cast sweet glances at the lovely lowland lassie.

Time after time he came to the house ; but Janet met his advances with such decided repulses, that honest Colin Lindsey would have suffered severely from her rebuffs, had it not been for the excellent supper with which Susan always took care that he should be served.

Colin, though a true-hearted man, capable of a sincere though rather slow affection, was by no means insensible to the amenities of life, and was warmly interested in a good meal topped up with a glass of toddy. He would sit in the chimney corner ladling the steaming liquid from his tumbler to his wine-glass, with the little round silver ladle which had belonged to Andrew's grandmother, and which was reserved for only highly favoured guests. Something in the action soothed him, and in spite of Janet's

persistent avoidance of him, he let Susan fill his pipe, and throw peats on the fire, with great satisfaction.

Gradually his mind began to open to a new train of ideas. It was all very well to admire a beautiful porcelain vase, but surely for every day work something less fragile and more useful might be better.

Janet avoided him and looked coldly at him, while Susan, on the contrary, was very good-natured, and seemed always at hand to minister to his comforts.

It took some time for him to work this idea into anything like a practical form, for Colin was a slow thinker; but by degrees he became familiar with it, and found the contemplation far from unpleasant.

Mrs. Macpherson was not long in per-

ceiving the change which had come over the spirit of his dream, and after the first surprise was much pleased at the prospect.

“It will serve Janet right,” she said, to herself, “nothing will bring her more to her senses than to see that her sister is preferred before her.”

Even while she said these words to herself, the mother's heart was vexed at the stupidity of the man, who could change so quickly from dumb admiration of the beautiful Janet, to lively pleasure in the society of the far more common-place Susan.

“Don't you spoil sport, mother, with your nonsense,” said Andrew, who saw more keenly than anyone imagined into the female politics of the household. “Don't you spoil sport, and above all don't tell him how much better Janet's

butter is than Susan's. He is just a canny Scot, and he is minded to get all he can for his money. He thinks because Susan is more outspoken than her sister, and has not such grand airs with her, that she will make the more useful wife of the two."

"Susan will make a very good wife," replied his spouse, rather hotly—anything like a reflection on one of her children was enough to rouse her ire, in spite of the inconsistency between her words and feelings.

"Ay, ay, woman! Susan will make a far better wife than he deserves; but she is not the lassie that Janet is, for all that," said Andrew.

"Ye're still hoping for the laird to get her," said the wife, imprudently. She felt it to be imprudent the moment she had spoken, for no sooner was the

sore subject broached, than Andrew flew into such a terrible rage that, accustomed as she was to these demonstrations on the part of her lord and master, Mrs. Macpherson fairly fled from his presence, unable to bear the torrent of abuse that she well knew would follow.

Taking refuge in the dairy, she shut and bolted the door, and then sinking down on a small wooden milking-stool, covered her face with her apron and burst into an agony of tears.

“Mother! dear mother! what is the matter?” said Janet.

“Your father, dear, he frightens me so when he goes on in that way,” said the poor woman, feebly.

Janet sighed wearily. When was there to be any peace in that unhappy house? From morning till night they were like

people living on the edge of a volcano, never sure that the burning flood might not burst forth in some new place and overwhelm them. Her knees knocked together under her; her heart sank and sank within her, as from the distant parlour came the sounds of the old man's frenzy.

It was weary work this living over and over these terrible scenes, and often did the tempter whisper in her ears of a way open to her, by which she could escape and flee to a life of happiness and rest.

Why not do as Donald Inverarity had so often begged her to do?—marry him at once, and, as he expressed it, ask leave afterwards.

There need be no difficulty about it, such things were often done!

The keeper's lodge in which Donald

lived was situated on the extreme edge of the estate and consequently not in the parish of Lashiels. It would be easy for him to get his parish minister to proclaim their banns three times on one Sunday, as was frequently done, and then none of her people would be there to forbid them !

This was what Donald frequently urged her to do, but Janet stood firm.

“What like blessing can I expect on my marriage, Donald, gin I go against my parent’s wishes at the very outset ?” she would say, and as she said it, standing in the strength and protection of her lover’s presence, she felt a secret power in her which would enable her to hold out bravely and to do the right.

But when Donald was not by, when those terrible scenes took place at home,

when the morning broke with leaden skies and the sun went down on her father's wrath and her mother's fretfulness, Janet would find herself often tempted to yield to Donald's wishes, and to cut the Gordian knot of perplexity which it seemed hopeless ever to try to unravel.

She comforted her mother on this occasion as best she might, without knowing the special cause of her distress, for Mrs. Macpherson obstinately refused to tell her what was the immediate cause of her father's anger.

The fact was, Mrs. Macpherson was afraid to tell her eldest daughter her suspicion of Colin Lindsey's disaffection; fearing in her uncomprehending way that Janet, though she would have nothing to say to the young farmer herself, would be angry at being told

that he had transferred his allegiance to her sister.

Janet had eyes of her own, and saw quite plainly how the land lay, and this geographical knowledge did not affect her at all.

Hers was too large a nature for petty feelings of jealousy and unkindness to come between her and the light.

If Susan was satisfied, she would be very glad indeed to pass on her quondam adorer to her, as she should only feel thankful that he was so safely disposed of, and so entirely and absolutely out of her way.

To Mrs. Macpherson this largeness of mind was incomprehensible. She did not understand her daughter's character, and she could not at all realize the depth and extent of Janet's love for Donald, or believe that such love was capable

of filling a life and soul, to the exclusion of all minor feelings and considerations. Lady Violet Ogilvie was not more destitute of sympathy in her house with the Anstruthers, than was Janet Macpherson amongst her own kith and kin.

So the short Winter days passed drearily on, and the storm-clouds gathered and burst as usual.

Sometimes there would come snow and cover the earth with its pure white pall. Then there would be frosty nights and brilliant days, when the earth shone and sparkled with every ray of light. Then occasionally semi-thaws, and then a real thaw, the temperature becoming almost too hot. Days in December which you might have fancied to be robbed from July, save for the dry and sapless branches of the trees.

Violets in sheltered nooks, and snowdrops poking their noses through the dark brown soil. Then this delusive Spring pageant would pass away, swept ignominiously off the stage by the winds from all directions.

So, backwards and forwards, veered the fickle seasons of hope and despondency, and so, in like manner, fluttered and flickered the feeble flame of trust and joy in Janet's breast.

It would have gone out entirely, blown upon as it was by the bitter winds, had it not been for the clear glowing light deep down in her heart.

Hers was no transient love; the capability to feel the greatest depths of the passion lay within her.

She lived on the love which coloured her life, and which gave reality to all her day dreams and fancies. Nothing else in

existence was half so sweet as the knowledge that she and Donald were all in all to one another.

But the long delay, the absence of all certainty in hope was making sad havoc of the poor girl's life.

It vexed her father to see the pale cheek, the set mouth, and the listless dejection of her attitude which spoke of weariness and sadness within.

Small outward signs tell much of the state of inward feelings to a subtle observer, and Andrew could see that in Janet energy had fled, lively expectation had gone, and hope only broke out now and then by fits and starts.

All this he saw, for he was a quick reader of countenance, but though it vexed him to note what he termed her obstinacy, no tender feeling of pity induced him to take away her trouble from her.

The remedy lay in his own hands ; he had only to speak a word, and Janet and Donald would be the two happiest people in the world ; but he had no intention of speaking that word, remaining hard and cruel, and vexed at the alteration in Janet's manner.

So passed the Winter, and with the Spring came no change in Janet's prospects, though long before the fresh leaves had shaken off their brown silken sheaths and ventured forth in their beautiful verdure, Susan was engaged to be married to Colin Lindsey, and was very happy and important on the subject.

CHAPTER XIV.

“Sweeter ’tis to hearken than to bear a part,
 Better to look on happiness than to carry a light heart.
 Sweeter to walk on cloudy hills with a sunny plain
 below,
 Than to weary of the brightness where the floods of
 sunshine flow.”

ALFORD.

BUT we must go back to London,
 to November and its fogs and its
 mud.

Sir Archibald Morton, with his
 mother and sister, had decided on spend-
 ing the whole Winter, contrary to their
 wont, in the Modern Babylon.

The move before the wedding had been

so fatiguing to Lady Morton, that she was quite disinclined for any further journeyings backwards and forwards.

Grace soon made herself happy and at home anywhere, and Sir Archibald found so much to do, that he by no means regretted the arrangement.

The subject of the lost jewels was still an all-absorbing one; many were the consultations held on the matter between Sir Archibald Morton, Major Armstrong and Mr. Purway, a most gentlemanlike detective, who was condescendingly assisting in the matter, on the trifling consideration of a good round sum of money from Sir Archibald's pocket.

No clue had yet been found to the mystery, except the somewhat negative one, that the servants had nothing to do with it.

“I believe, Sir Archibald,” said Mr. Pur-

way, "that some clever thief made his way into the house in the disguise of a waiter, and so, while the butler and his assistants were busy in the dining-room, made his way to the drawing-room unnoticed and unchallenged. It was a sharp trick, and very well carried out, but I will be even with the fellow yet before I am many days older."

This had been the tenor of Mr. Purway's discourse on the very first occasion on which Sir Archibald had consulted him.

He had then treated the robbery as a very simple affair, and implied, in a light and airy manner, that he hoped to probe the matter to the core, and to restore to the bereaved bride her lost treasures.

To hear him talk, you would have thought that thief-taking, to a man of his

superior wisdom and understanding, was the easiest thing in the world.

“I shall soon get them, Sir Archibald,” he said. “You may tell your sister, Mrs. Poyns, that there is very little doubt she will have her jewels by the time she will require them for her bridal dinner parties.”

This was hopeful at all events, but unfortunately Mr. Purway's cheering prophecies were not fulfilled, and weeks went by and still no tidings could be heard of the jewels.

“Do you think the fellow knows his business, Archie?” said Major Armstrong.

“I should think so,” said Sir Archibald, “at least every one tells me he is the sharpest of the lot, and he talks big enough.”

“That is no criterion,” said Major

Armstrong. "I don't hold with your talking chaps as a rule."

"Well, I rather like a talkative detective," said Mrs. Becket, who was calling on Lady Morton when this conversation took place; "by all means introduce me to him next time he comes here. I like to extend the sphere of my knowledge, and who can tell what information one might get out of your friend."

Archie laughed. "Well, Mrs. Becket," he replied, "if you will come here to-morrow morning about ten o'clock, I can gratify you, as I expect Purway to call."

"Delightful!" said Mrs. Becket, "you could not have given me a more pleasant invitation. I am so tired of polite society!"

"If that is the case," said Grace, "I am afraid you will not appreciate Archie's

friend, Mr. Purway, for he is the most polite gentleman it has been my fate to see for a long time."

"Highly polished as to manners and boots," said Major Armstrong.

"Well, for my part, I don't care so much about his manners as his skill," said Lady Morton. "I hope and trust he will put us in the way of getting dear Petronel's beautiful jewels, but I begin to be afraid that we shall never see them again."

"Never despair, Madam," said Mrs. Becket; "set a thief to catch a thief, you know."

"Upon my word, Mrs. Becket, I shall repent of my offer of introducing you to my particular friend, if you malign him in that manner," said Sir Archibald.

"Well, you know, my dear Sir, that

there is truth in the old proverb as applied to keepers and poachers, and it is very likely the same with respect to thieves and thief-takers," said Mrs. Becket.

"Well, I shall leave you to judge for yourself," said Archibald, gaily, as he accompanied his lively guest to the door. "Mind you are here in good time to-morrow, and then I shall trust to you to draw your own conclusions."

"I will, you may depend upon it; I generally do. It is one of my principal occupations in life, only I never let my conclusions be the end, but make them the beginnings of interesting romances in real life. Bless you! I heard a girl say last night that she was in the middle of about a dozen stories in different periodicals. I told her that I could beat her hollow, though I would

not touch her favourite sensational trash with a pair of tongs ! I told her I was in the middle of dozens and dozens of romances, and that mine had the advantage over hers of being every one of them stories without an end !”

“ But don’t you think it saves trouble to read them in good print on nice clean paper, instead of boring yourself by ferreting out clues, and odds and ends, and tag-rags to make the parts of your stories fit ?” said Archie.

“ Not a bit of it !” said Mrs. Becket. “ I’ll answer for it ; you would agree with me if you only take the trouble to think.”

“ The process involves too much mental exertion ; I like to have my thinking done for me,” said Archie, in a languid drawl, put on on purpose to tease Mrs. Becket.

“ Now, Archie, you are much too

good a fellow to take to that nonsense ; speak out like a man, and don't whine," said Mrs. Becket.

"But, really," laughed Archie, "if you go about the world putting everybody into your living stories, you must be a person to be dreaded. One comfort is, that you can't get any poetical incidents out of me, I am much too common-place an individual."

"I am not at all sure of that," said his relentless tormentor. "I did not spend those pleasant weeks at Lashiels last Summer for nothing ; I don't always repeat what I see and hear, but I use my eyes and ears to some purpose for all that."

Archie started and coloured visibly.

What could this sharp old lady have discovered ? something, evidently ; but yet how ? and what ?

Mrs. Becket saw his confusion, and laying her hand kindly on his arm, said in a voice much more womanly and gentle than her usual sharp prattle.

“Don’t be afraid, I don’t wish to be mischievous, or to interfere in any way ; but I can’t help seeing into things, and though the story of your life is at present a very dim one to me, still there is a story, and a very interesting one, and I like you all the better for your part in it. The first volume is over and shut, but there is more to come.”

With these parting words, and an affectionate pressure of the hand, the old lady took her leave.

“I wonder what she means?” murmured Archie to himself. “At any other time I should have been angry, and have put it down to impertinent prying into other people’s concerns, but somehow I

don't feel vexed with her for what she said. There was something about her to-day which made me like her better than I ever did before."

Mrs. Becket *was* wonderfully clear-sighted, and she prided herself on her astuteness in seeing the ins and outs of her neighbours' concerns.

Nevertheless, with all her bluntness and out-spoken remarks, there was a little shade of untruthfulness in her.

Not that she wished to deceive. In her secret soul she was honest and true as the day; but she had a way of seeing a little of people's secrets, and imagining a great deal more. She had a way of letting out casually (as in the present instance) a hint to the effect that she knew certain things which others imagined to be profound secrets—when in reality she only drew her own conclu-

sions from certain shrewd observations she was in the habit of making.

More often than not, these observations were right, and the conclusions drawn from them proved right also; but, by these judicious hints, she constantly drew forth the confidential disclosures of what her fine and shrewd senses had told her existed.

People when they are very full of a subject are not difficult to draw out upon it, and Mrs. Becket, who possessed in an inordinate degree what is generally called "female curiosity," managed in this manner to become the depositary of many a secret.

To her credit be it spoken, she never betrayed these confidences, and she never made mischief; which, considering her large acquaintance and her inquiring mind, told greatly in her favour.

Sir Archibald Morton, young, rich and handsome, had to run the gauntlet which his prominent position brought upon him, just as other young men of wealth and family are running it constantly.

He had to go through the ordeal of gossip, both country and town, and it is a matter of small wonder that such an adept in the art of settling other people's affairs, as was Mrs. Becket, should have had her say on the subject of his remaining so long unmarried.

It was true that Archie was still quite a young man, but then he was his own master, and gossips had been busy with his name for the last three or four years.

To ordinary minds the spectacle presented by the love making of Mr. Poyns to Petronel, their subsequent

engagement and marriage, would have been a sufficiently dainty dish to satisfy the hunger, and to prevent for a time at least that craving for more which the love of excitement creates.

But Mrs. Becket's was by no means an ordinary mind: one piece of gossip only served her, as the oysters do the aldermen at the commencement of a grand civic entertainment, to whet the appetite and prepare the palate for the due appreciation of the dainties to follow in due course. The plain simple thread of a story, as represented by Petronel's engagement to Mr. Poyns, was only so much string on which to hang the pearls of by-play, plot, and mystery of the living novel Mrs. Becket wove in every house in which she stayed.

There was not a creature at Lashiels

who was not pressed into some part of the romance which the lively imagination of Mrs. Becket distilled from the faintest buds within her reach.

She was a shrewd old lady, and she had a way of talking of her insight into characters, and of her knowledge of other people's affairs, which implied a great deal, and which caused her victims to writhe uneasily beneath her sharp glances, and by their self-consciousness betray the very facts which she had guessed at, and which her curiosity was aching to have confirmed.

I believe it was Sidney Smith who said of some great man that his "foible was omniscience."

There are very many to whom the observation applies, and amongst the number was Mrs. Becket.

Naturally sharp and quick-witted, she had become duly sensible of her own gifts in this respect, and liked nothing better than being tried in all sorts and subjects of conversation. From political economy to church government, from pudding-making to love-making, there was no turn which conversation could take which would puzzle Mrs. Becket, or leave her behind.

Her remarks on every subject, grave or gay, were clever and appropriate, and though her knowledge of things often did not go far below the surface, still her intelligence and general observation led her to take interest in everything, and to be behind-hand in nothing.

Certainly her foible was omniscience, but her foible was a pleasant one and

rendered her an extremely agreeable companion.

Young and old, learned and ignorant, scientific and frivolous, Mrs. Becket reckoned amongst her intimate friends. People are made up of sharp corners and angles, and of curiously disjointed pieces, and were it not that beings existed who could fit into odd places, and suit all tastes, it would be a very dull and unsympathetic world.

Mrs. Becket was a healthy, active old lady, with clear black eyes, which were very far-seeing, and which gave one the impression of seeing a great deal further than the actual range of her vision.

When she whispered a hint of her knowledge of people's secrets, as she had done to Archie, and as she was fond of doing to all who came near

her, there was something a little alarming in the bright look of those clear black eyes, and the knowing glance which was meant to imply that she knew a great deal more than she considered it prudent to reveal.

When Archie had seen her safely out of the house, he felt a little uneasy as to the extent of her penetration.

He went at once to his sister Grace's room and laid the whole matter before her. Open as had been his confidences to her at Lashiels, somehow since they had been in London he had not cared to speak of Janet, or of the romance of his life even to her; his companion, his sister, Grace, had always been to him a sort of second self, a trusty friend and companion, a safe repository for all his private affairs.

He trusted her implicitly, and she

was in every respect worthy of his trust.

Several times lately, however, she had longed to know the state of his feelings, and whether time was really working a cure of that deep heart-wound, or if it had merely allowed a soft moss to grow over the place, to hide the extent of the still rankling sore.

She feared to open it afresh, by asking questions on the subject; but her heart often went out in vague longings to know the extent of the wound, and the perfectness of the cure.

Now, after patient waiting, the time had come, and Archie, out of the fulness of his heart, poured forth the whole story.

Mrs. Becket's hints had disturbed him, and he now applied to Grace to dis-

cover how much or how little she considered the old lady knew.

“Don’t you distress yourself about it, Archie,” Grace said, when he had told her his fears. “I know quite well how you feel, and that it is very disagreeable for you to imagine that you and your affairs have been made the subjects of idle gossip; but I really do not think that has been the case, and I am sure Mrs. Becket has only been gathering together the veriest shreds of facts, and weaving them together with a good deal of her own fertile imagination.”

“Of course, Brownie, you and I know that it is impossible that outsiders can comprehend the true state of the case, even supposing any facts have transpired, which I don’t believe; but for all that, one does not like Mrs. Becket’s sharp

eyes to be fixed on one's private affairs," said Sir Archibald.

"And what is the true state of the case, if I may ask?" said Grace.

"The true state of the case is, dear sister, that there are wounds which can never be entirely healed, but which must always leave a scar," said her brother.

"But the wound does not fester?" said Grace, anxiously.

"No, I hope and trust not; but it would be untrue to say that it does not still make itself felt at times," said Archie.

Grace felt sad, but yet relieved. There was something in the very wording of his sentence which spoke volumes to her quick mind.

He said, "It would be untrue to say that it does not *still* make itself felt *at times*."

And Grace argued well from those little words *still* and *at times*. It was not felt always then, nor would the pain last for ever.

Archie had gone the right way to work, by sternly showing himself that he had now no right to think of Janet's love—for that that love, that most precious possession, which he had so much longed for, could never be his, but belonged to some one else.

“What do you advise me to do, Brownie?” said Archie, “shall I ask Mrs. Becket what she means, or shall I drop the subject, and pretend to think nothing of it?”

“I should drop the subject certainly,” said Grace. “For it can do no good, and it might be very painful to enter into particulars with her. Besides, though I must say I never heard of her making

mischievous, still an inordinate love of gossip, such as she possesses, often leads people to say more than they ought."

"Yes, Brownie, you are right, as you generally are, and I am not at all anxious to discuss tender and painful subjects with Mrs. Becket," said Archie.

The brother and sister were drawn more closely together now than ever. Whether it was from Grace's cognisance of the saddest circumstance in his life, which in itself caused an increased intimacy, or whether it was that by sorrow he had been brought to appreciate sympathy and to value his sister's honesty and discretion, I cannot say; but certain it is, that though they talked but little comparatively together now, the bond which united them was becoming more and more tender and strong. True feel-

ing is often inarticulate, and Archie felt that Grace was his friend and comforter, though she said but little.

CHAPTER XV.

“To worship, not to wed, Celestials bid me :
 I dreamt to mate in heaven and wake in hell,
 For ever doomed, Ixion-like, to reel
 On mine own passions’ ever-burning wheel.”

C. KINGSLEY.

PETRONEL MORTON—we beg her
 pardon, “the Honourable Mrs.
 Poyns”—was one of those beings born
 to sunshine, to prosperity, to the full
 share of goods which fall to the lot of
 mortals here on earth. No one ever
 thought of crossing Petronel; from her
 veriest infancy she had been a spoilt
 child, and she took as her due and no
 more than her due, kindness and tender-

ness, part of which would have formed the brightness of the life of many a neglected being. But continued sunshine often creates a hardness of the soil, a callousness to small impressions, a cold selfishness, from which Petronel was by no means exempt.

We are told to love others as we do ourselves, but it is hard to do so, and Petronel never attempted anything that was hard.

The safety of her own little finger was of more importance to her than the destiny of nations, and her own comfort, convenience and adornment were the things she chiefly exerted herself to compass.

Not many weeks had gone over her head since her marriage before Petronel discovered that she was not quite so happy as she had intended to be.

Her husband was passionately fond of her, and in his silent adoring way let her see that there was nothing he would not do for her.

But a silently adoring husband is not the most lively thing in the world, and Petronel was fast becoming bored.

Now, for a young and newly married woman, with every good thing the world can bestow at her feet, to become bored is a serious matter, and argues something terribly wrong.

She had her wealth, her rank, her youth, her beauty; surely with these good gifts showered upon her without stint, there was every reason why she should be happy. But she was not. She was travelling with her husband through Italy, and was to spend the Winter in Rome.

A very delightful prospect one would

say—a prospect much to be envied by those whose good luck has never brought them such a pleasure. But Petronel was very unworthy of it.

She cared very little for pictures, and nothing at all for antiquities. The long journey tired her, and the perpetual companionship of her silent husband bored her.

Nothing pleased her. The butter she declared was sour, the tea tasteless, the bread a calamity.

The only thing that seemed to excite her much were the envious remarks of other ladies when they beheld her dog.

There seemed to be a perfect mania among the female travelling population for pet-dogs. Little black noses peeped out from under mantles where the rest of the animals were secreted, little white ears cropped up from beneath the lids

of travelling baskets, and asthmatic wheezings or sharp shrill barks greeted the ear in every first-class railway compartment. But among all these charming pets, the canine triumph of the period was claimed by Petronel's wee dog, which was shaped like a bear and about the size of a rat.

The substantial part of Petronel's conversation was addressed to this sweet animal, while her husband snatched eagerly at the conversational crumbs which fell to his share.

Poor Mr. Poyns was certainly to be pitied, and yet he would have been angry if anyone had told him so.

He perfectly adored his wife, and having a very humble opinion of himself, felt it only natural that she did not appear to be enraptured by his society. It was an intense gratification to

him to be seen walking with her in the streets, or seated by her side in a carriage.

The looks of admiration directed towards her were taken as matters of course by Petronel, but to her lord and master they were never ending sources of delight. It might be hard to say in what that delight consisted, but it did exist nevertheless, and fortunately for the neglected bridegroom brightened his existence considerably.

They were in Florence now—beautiful Florence with its many treasures of art, and its heart-stirring crowd of memories.

But Petronel passed equally unmoved beneath the vaulted dome of the cathedral and the large and more brilliant one of an Italian blue sky.

Her beautiful face wore the same weary, half scornful expression when she drove

along the sunny Lung' Arno, or walked in the Boboli Gardens, following the stream of promenaders through the groves of ilexes, whose gloomy shade must be so delightful in the Summer, but whose dark foliage seems rather funereal in the Winter.

Mr. Poyns never did himself justice when he was with his wife.

He would have got on better had he been a little more indifferent to her. He was too devoted, too adoring, too anxious to be worthy of notice to be at ease with her.

There was always a kind of strain upon his mind, for fear she should think him silly, and so despise him. But Mr. Poyns was by no means silly. He had very good abilities and a sterling honesty of purpose which might have made him a very valuable member of society, had it not

been for his dreadful shyness and nervousness.

Petronel was far too young, and the life blood tingled too fiercely in her veins for her to become languidly indolent always.

She was even now, though lounging in the corner of her carriage, apparently in an apathetic state, really quite impatient at the monotony of her life, and quite keen in her desire to be stirring.

Archie had been right when he playfully told his sister on her wedding-day that he was afraid she would miss the excitement of her flirtations.

She had laughed contemptuously when he had said so, but nevertheless there was a grain of truth in his words.

We have seen how vexed she had been at Major Armstrong's indifference, and that feeling proceeded from her love of conquest.

In the days gone by, when she had been the acknowledged belle of London seasons, the pleasure of adding nightly to her triumphs had been great.

Now, though she would not have owned it, Archie's words were already true. She did miss the excitement of her flirtations.

Grace, with her perpetual fund of tranquil happiness, and her incapability of feeling dull, had often mourned in silence over the laughter and stagnation which came over her beautiful sister when her triumphs were over for a time, and there was an armistice in her warfare against the hearts of mankind. But that languor had always been attributed by the gentle mother to physical causes.

Late hours and excitement carried her on for a time, but a reaction of the

nerves followed as a matter of course, and poor Lady Morton would call in the family physician, and anxiously wait till some fresh excitement again brought light to those large eyes and a flush to that fair face.

When her darling looked bright and sparkling again, Lady Morton's uneasiness ceased. Nothing could be seriously amiss with so brilliant and beautiful a being.

Grace, however, was more far-seeing, and that very sudden flaring up of the lamp of Petronel's spirits would pain and distress her deeply.

It is such an unsafe thing to be so dependent on sunshine, and while the gorgeous butterfly floated airily off in the light, the little quiet brown moth grieved silently at home.

When Petronel had decided on marry-

ing Mr. Poyns, it was as the future Lady Delabole that she considered herself, and that thought served to keep up her spirits in the dull walks and drives with her silent lover.

Even now, as she yawned silently behind her well-gloved hand, her eyes saw nothing of the beautiful view from San Miniato, being occupied by an imaginary glimpse of future glories and triumphs.

Mr. Poyns was trying to summon up resolution to tell his wife about Michel Angelo and the fortifications, but he was doubtful of opening the subject for fear of boring her.

Then he thought of pointing out Fiesole, or at all events Galileo's Tower, but the words would not form themselves on his halting tongue, and he was morally convinced that, if he did venture

on any historical reminiscences, his wife's cold look of surprise would nip his eloquence in the bud.

"Florence is shockingly dull, and this *tramontana* cuts me through to the bone," said the bride at last, breaking a silence which had continued nearly half-an-hour. "Let us go on as quickly as possible to Rome."

"By all means, my dear; would you like to start to-morrow?" said her obedient husband.

"Yes, I think so; you had better telegraph for rooms at once. I shall be ill if I stay here any longer, I am convinced," said she.

"Ill! my dear; I hope not," said Mr. Poyns in alarm. "But if you think this place too cold we will certainly move at once; would you like to take the night train?"

“No, thank you; to-morrow morning will do very well; besides, there is all the packing to be done,” said the bride.

Her restless spirit pined for change, she was in every sense of the word a pleasure-seeker—and pleasure-seekers are not always pleasure-finders. The very idea of a change from their present quiet existence to the gaiety and bustle of a Roman season seemed to have the same effect on Petronel that a whiff of fresh sea-air has on a pale, sickly London invalid.

She roused herself from her listless attitude, and, with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, talked eagerly to her astonished and delighted bridegroom. Never had he seen her so charming, so animated, so gay.

The vehemence of delight he experienced

showed how thirstily he longed for some change in her demeanour.

To hear her talk of Rome and its beauties, and of her longing to be there, was quite edifying.

“To think that to-morrow we shall really see the blue hills and the green Campagna! that in a few hours we shall actually be in Rome!” she exclaimed, and Mr. Poyns, as he looked at her with astonished admiration, never remembered the indifferent glances she had but just now bestowed on the beautiful scenery before her, never thought of the yawns she had stifled when she visited the Pitti Palace. There were plenty of faces on those walls, to be sure; but Petronel longed for real flesh and blood faces, for fresh worlds to conquer, for fresh draughts of the intoxicating cup of admiration.

Returning to their hotel, Petronel hurried to her room to give her maid instructions about the packing, while her obedient husband, still glowing with delight at the unwonted affection displayed in his wife's manner, went off to see about the necessary arrangements.

“Dear Petronel!” he thought, “what a selfish brute I am to wish to keep her all to myself! She is so good and amiable too, she has never complained, and here we have been married more than five weeks. Of course she wants society. What an oaf I must have been not to think of it before! Won't she make a sensation when she gets to Rome, though? I am longing to take her to balls and parties, and to see how much she is admired.”

With these thoughts, the happy bridegroom made his way to a jeweller's shop, and selected a costly locket for his beautiful wife, as a sort of thank-offering for the unwonted graciousness of her mood.

On returning to the hotel, he was met at the door by his courier, with a telegram in his hand.

"Just come, Sir," said the man. "I did not take it upstairs for fear of frightening Mrs. Poyns. Telegrams are very alarming things, Sir, especially to ladies."

Hardly noticing this comforting remark, Mr. Poyns tore open the envelope in eager haste.

People, as a rule, do not telegraph from England to Italy without some good reason, and Mr. Poyns may be ex-

cused for the nervousness with which he scanned the message.

It was from Mr. Strode, Lord Delabole's solicitor, and was very short but very important.

The bridegroom rubbed his eyes, and looked again and again at the message, as if unable to grasp the meaning of its few short words.

"Lord Delabole attacked with apoplexy—died at eight o'clock this morning," it said.

What! his father dead! his father, who, only a few short weeks before had been so well, so bright, so thoroughly at his ease in the gay scene of the wedding festivities!

It was too awful! too sudden! he could not take in the sense of the words at which he was gazing.

By degrees they stole in upon his

senses, and he began to comprehend them.

He must go home to England at once. His mother and sisters would want him. That was the first thought which crossed his numbed brain.

His father dead ! he could not realize all that was meant by that short sentence.

Different as they had been in character, far apart as their tastes and pursuits had been, there had been a great deal of deep undying love and affection between the father and son.

Yes, he must return home at once. His only brother was a lad at Eton. He was the reliable member of the family, and his place was now with his widowed mother. But Petronel ! could he ask her to give up her travels and make a hurried and fatiguing journey home to England ?

She who had been so happy and bright at the prospect of her gaieties in Rome that very afternoon! It did seem hard to ask her to give them up. So he thought, forgetting that anyhow, after what had occurred, the gaieties must wait for a time.

He was so bewildered he could not take in all the ins and outs of the case. Passing his hand rapidly over his eyes, which were dim with tears of real feeling, he hastened upstairs to seek his wife, and to tell her of the sad news.

He found her in animated conversation with her maid over the packing of her costly dresses.

"To think that to-morrow we shall actually be in Rome!" she exclaimed gaily as he entered.

He looked at her for a moment in

silence, unable to form the words in which to convey the unexpected tidings.

She looked so young, so bright, so gay, how could he have the heart to sadden her? Receiving no answer to her raptures, Petronel looked suddenly at him, and saw at a glance that something very dreadful had happened.

“What is it?” she exclaimed; then motioning to her maid to leave the room, she drew nearer to her husband and laid her hand on his arm.

“My darling!” he faltered, “here is terrible news! I don’t know how to tell you.”

Petronel’s face grew pale, her limbs trembled. What could it be?

“Not Mamma!” she whispered, her white lips refusing to utter more.

“No, my dear! it is my father!” said he.

“ Lord Delabole !” said Petronel, “ what of him ? is he ill ? ”

“ It is very sad news, dear,” said he, drawing near to her, and putting his arm round her waist. “ It is very, very sad news ! and it has quite upset me.”

“ Let me see the telegram,” said Petronel, abruptly.

He gave it to her, and he watched her as she read and re-read the short message it contained.

“ Dear Petronel !” he thought, “ how tender-hearted she is ! Fancy her being so agitated on hearing of my trouble ! ”

Petronel was indeed agitated. Her colour came and went, her parched lips refused to give utterance to any sounds.

Seeing her thus moved, seeing as he thought her sympathy and greatness

of soul, the adoring bridegroom could not but feel comforted.

The loss of his father was a very great and real grief to him, but he had not expected that his bride would have thrown herself so entirely into his feelings.

Proud as he had been of the sensation her beauty had caused in Florence, much as he had hugged himself as his quick ear caught the whisper, "Who is she?" when she passed along the streets, he had never felt so fond of, so humbly devoted to, his wife as he did at this moment.

It was his sorrow which she was feeling, his grief in which she was sympathising.

Yes, she was beautiful exceedingly—a walking picture, a visible poem, and this display of what he imagined to be womanly compassion seemed to give

finish to the picture, pathos to the poem!

So thought the bridegroom, judging from his own interpretation of the expression of her countenance; but I need not tell my more astute readers that he was altogether mistaken in his notion of her extreme sensibility.

Petronel was by no means capable of the depth of feeling for which he gave her credit.

A spoilt child always, she had learned to look upon her beauty as a sort of capital which was to be invested in the best securities, and which was to bring her in large returns. She had long felt that the apex of feminine honour was to be attained by a good (?) marriage, and that the lowest depth of feminine humiliation was to be reached by dying an old maid, or almost equally by

marrying a nobody! She had married for rank—and now, when only a few weeks a bride, the glory and honour to which she had looked forward as a dim perspective view had really come! She was already a Viscountess—Lady Delabole, the wife of John, Viscount Delabole—how well it sounded!

She had often called herself so in the privacy of her own apartment, but now her honour was real, patent to the whole world—now indeed she would be Queen of Society!

CHAPTER XVI.

“A millstone and a human heart
Go ever round and round,
If they have nothing else to grind
Themselves they must be ground.”

SCHILLER.

“OF course, there is no question about it, we must start for England at once,” said the bride, after a few minutes’ conversation.

“At once, by all means! I should have wished to go to-night, but I am afraid it will tire you, dearest,” said he.

“Not at all,” said Petronel eagerly.

“I am very well and strong, and I would not keep you a moment longer away from your proper place than I could help, so I will go and hurry the packing and I shall be quite ready when you are.”

The train did not leave till late, so there would be time for Petronel to rest and dine comfortably before they need start. Having given his orders to his courier, he sauntered out into the streets, hoping that solitude and the cool evening breezes might soothe his troubled brain. As yet he had barely realized what had happened. All he knew was that a great and crushing sorrow had fallen upon him, and that at a moment when his life had seemed most full of joy.

Twilight was stealing over the city, the strong pulse of the day was throbbing

with less violence, soothed by the calm light and by the level rays of the western sun.

From all the churches the bells were tinkling their call for the Ave Maria. Beppa, the wonderful flower-seller, once flower-girl, had disposed of all her bouquets, (the stalest and most faded having been given with the most gracious and winning smiles) and had betaken herself and her flapping hat to her country residence. The mosaic shops were being shut up for the night, and a crowd of weary but liberated workmen were emerging into the evening air.

Mr. Poyns walked blindly on, heeding nothing, thinking of nothing. He was stunned, overpowered by the weight of conflicting feelings. Only a few minutes before he had been so happy, so bright, that is to say comparatively.

His thoughts had been bright and happy enough, irradiated by his delight in his wife's unusual graciousness. And now all was changed. The light was for the time quenched and was succeeded by a thick darkness, a darkness that might be felt.

He walked along the pavement in front of the hotels on the Lung'Arno mechanically, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, and thinking only of what had happened.

Different as they had been, there had been a strong cord of affection between the father and the son, and now that cord had suddenly given way, snapped asunder without giving previous signs of weakness.

The bell of a church near the river tolled slowly, as a summons to the devout to attend the Viaticum to a dying person.

A procession came slowly towards him, composed chiefly of little boys carrying tapers, and closed by a priest who carried the Host in a shrine, while a sacristan held a canopy over it. All hats were taken off as it passed, and idle words were hushed for a moment out of respect for the Holy Presence.

The procession passed on, turned a corner, and disappeared. It had not taken long to go by, but it had given a new turn to the bridegroom's thoughts, and had roused him to the consciousness that death, trouble and sorrow were near to others as well as to himself, and that the thin veil of conventionalism had many rents in it, which disclosed the dark side of the landscape to those who had the courage to look for it.

He left the pavement which was beginning to be thronged with busy

idlers, and wandered on to the Ponte di Santa Trinita, the bridge with the beautiful oval curves.

The Arno flowed beneath, placid and low, the lights reflected in its waters giving back answering smiles to their brilliant originals.

The Ponte Vecchio stood out grandly in the semi-darkness, its aspect gaining indescribably by the mystery of its night-shadows. The brick Campanile of the churches rose high into the clear sky, which could be seen through their open arches. Beyond again were mountains gleaming white in the soft moonlight and covered lightly with snow.

Mr. Poyns was outwardly a very ordinary common-place man, and none of his friends would have accused him of poetical tendencies, but as he stood there leaning on the parapet of the bridge

looking at the Arno, and lulled by the sound of its waters, thoughts came thronging through his mind which would indeed have astonished Petronel could she have read them.

His face had changed; it looked almost old, and a little stern, when he first left the hotel, but now it grew soft and tender again.

His naturally shy, awkward manner deceived people as to his real nature. But he had a depth of feeling within him which raised his whole being into an atmosphere too pure for such a being as Petronel to breathe in.

He had been too modest all his life to be introspective; but he had often been absorbed by high and noble ideas, which to the outward observer would have appeared far beyond his ken. So engrossed was he in his thoughts that

he took little or no notice of the objects before him.

The distant hum of the city, the nearer rattle of carriages and of carts were all blended into a confused noise of which he took no heed.

The tall Englishman standing there so quietly, with so sad a face, and so dejected a manner attracted general attention from the gay loungers crossing the bridge on their way to the brilliantly lighted *cafés*.

“*E innamorato, quello,*” said a lively Italian to his friend.

“No, no,” replied the other, “those cold islanders are never in love, their hearts are made of *pietro duro*. It is something wrong with his pocket, *amico mio*; that is the vulnerable part of an Englishman.”

“Pah! let us not look at him let us

see what the *chef* at Doney's will do to chase away our melancholy which the sight of him has engendered," said Antonio; and taking Bassanio's arm he led the way to his favourite dining-place. Their polished leather boots, their Jouvin's best lavender gloves were facts, and more interesting ones than the affairs of the great true-hearted Englishman whose grave looks had cast a shadow for a moment over their sunny carelessness.

Truly the sorrows of the pure in heart are very incomprehensible to the fluttering ephemera who revel in the surface brightness of the world. But even Antonio and Bassanio, had they been able to read his thoughts, would have had more sympathy with him than it was within the possibilities of Petronel's nature to feel.

Her large blue eyes opened wide as she looked at her husband as he sat at dinner with her that evening, and she noticed how sad he was, how utterly unable to eat, how really dejected ! His face was of an ashy whiteness, but the clear pale flame of his eye burnt with an intense light she had never seen before, through the shadows that had gathered round it.

Petronel, with all her faults, was no hypocrite, and she found it difficult to enact the *rôle* of disconsolate mourner, when the event which so saddened her husband brought to her the prize for which she had played.

Fortunately for her, her husband was too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice her heightened colour, or her pleasure when her officious maid addressed her as "my lady."

Even in the midst of his depression the bridegroom felt a thrill of joy, as he sat opposite her in the railway carriage and saw her blue eyes flashing with daring brilliancy, her changing colour, her fair and open brow, and her manner haughty and yet girlish. She was very beautiful and she was his wife! there was no hypocrisy in his tender adoring glances, for he loved her with a love far too real, far too deep for her to fathom or appreciate.

Young, lovely, and most becomingly dressed, it is no wonder that she did produce a most entrancing effect on him.

Perfect happiness it is not meant that any human being should enjoy, but he had been very near it that afternoon, when his bride had been so sweet and gracious to him. And now he told him-

self that though his father's death was a real and abiding grief to him, it would be selfishness to allow his sorrow to cast a gloom over her bright nature. So he exerted himself to talk to her, and by degree he told her of his early days, and spoke so feelingly of his father's kindness to him that Petronel was quite surprised at his eloquence. The nervous shyness had left him and his manner was perfectly calm.

"If he was always like this," she thought, "it would be a great relief. I hope, now that he is Lord Delabole, he will remember that he is somebody, and that he will cease to be so dreadfully modest and humble."

And so this ill-assorted couple travelled on day after day, till they had left sunny Italy behind them, and had reached England.

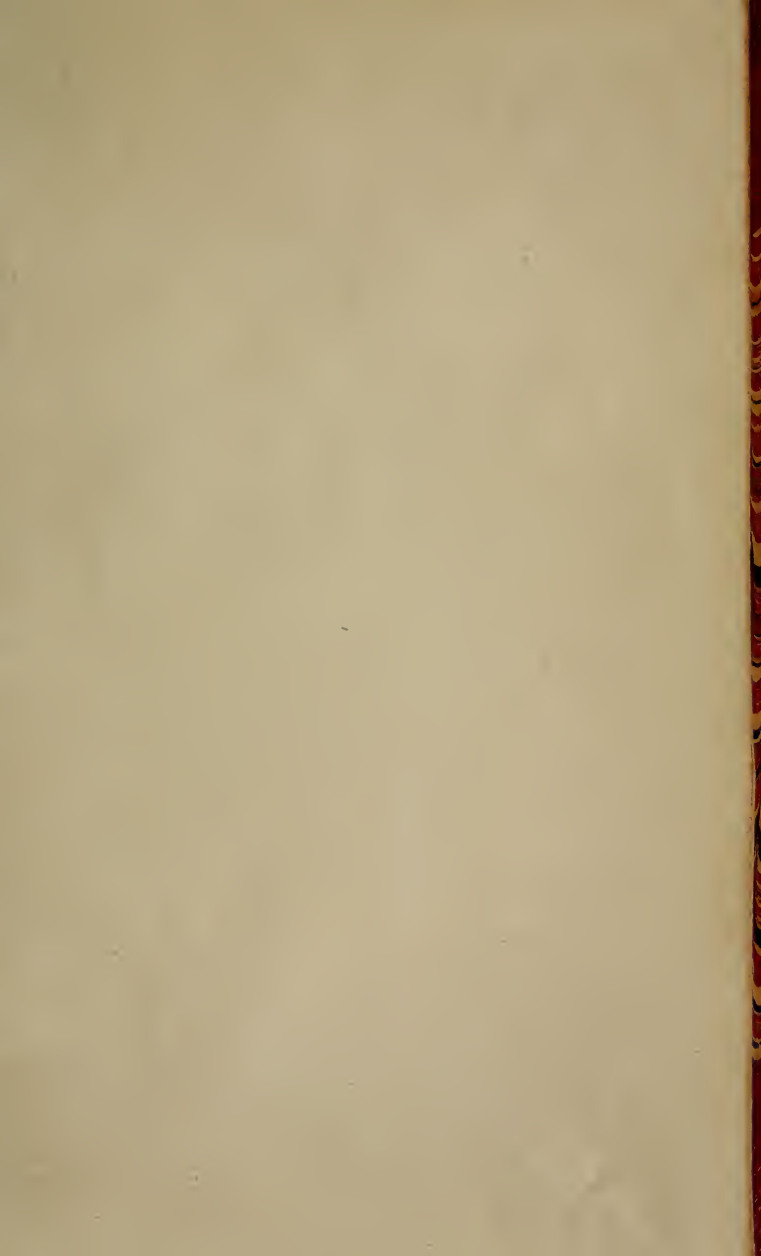
The craving for power, for admiration, for excitement, was the absorbing dream of Petronel's life, and she was utterly incapable of appreciating the shy but enthusiastic temperament of her husband, while it would have wrung his very heart-strings could he have known the pettiness and frivolity of the nature of her whom he so adored. When two hearts are all in all to each other, it is comparatively of little moment though the whole world be against them ; but if an invisible barrier of want of sympathy divides them it is a sad case indeed, and the little rift widens slowly till it becomes a yawning abyss, a great gulf which nothing can bridge over.

It is very well for the *flâneurs* of society to take a bird's eye view of the follies of the world, and to laugh at them, but could their glances go deeper they would see, hidden beneath the surface, things

which would make them sad and sick at heart.

So the world goes on, and so passes before our eyes a phantasmagoria of people dancing and feasting, marrying and giving in marriage, struggling for money-bags and coronets, and not seeing through the cloud of dust they raise, that there is a pure and peaceful atmosphere, just above and beyond them, in which those live who are as far removed from them as if they belonged to another sphere.

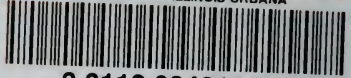
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